

Back to Basics

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by Leonard Fein

As warm and toasty as is the prospect of peace, there was no good reason to suppose that everyone would join in the chorus of approval for Israel's agreement with the PLO. In the Palestinian camp, the opponents were readily predictable: All those who have wished and worked for Israel's destruction, or who have for one reason or another opposed Arafat's leadership, or who believe that the PLO conceded too much (and/or got too little) in the agreement.

Nor is there great surprise that in Israel, Likud and the parties to its right are all jabbering away about how Gaza/Jericho is merely the first step towards Palestinian statehood.

They are right, of course. There's little doubt that if the process unfolds without any major setbacks, it will eventually issue in a Palestinian state of some sort. But that near-certainty is not by itself a telling indictment of the agreement, for it is not necessarily the case that the emergence of an independent Palestine is a greater danger to the Jewish state than the persistence of the status quo.

That's the real divide in Israel. It's been the divide for better than half a century, in fact, ever since Britain's Peel Commission first proposed partition in 1937. That proposal, accepted by the World Zionist Organization after fierce debate, was bitterly opposed by the Revisionists, from which Likud is directly descended. But it was the policy of the Yishuv (the pre-State Jewish community in Palestine), and of Israel from its

inception until 1977.

In 1977, with the accession of Menahem (Not One Inch) Begin to Israel's prime-ministership, Israel officially abandoned its commitment to partition. In response to those who argued that the legitimacy of Israel's statehood derived from the United Nations Partition Resolution of 1947, Begin and his supporters argued, quite plausibly, that Israel could hardly be expected to offer indefinite endorsement of a policy that had been rejected by the other side ever since its promulgation.

When Yitzhak Rabin and Labor were returned to power in 1992, they came with their historic perception intact: In the land mass between the Mediterranean and the Jordan, where two people with competing claims live, the choices are limited: If Israel retains all the land, it must either accept the status quo, or offer the Palestinian Arabs citizenship, or expel ("transfer," in the accepted euphemism) them. The status quo is misnamed; it is not a stable state, but one that deteriorates. As virtually everyone recognizes, its would, if not interrupted, hasten the ascendancy of Hamas. More terror, more stabbings, more hatred, more tragedy, utter waste. Citizenship? As Prime Minister Rabin said when he was interviewed on the MacNeil©Lehrer program, that would mean a 35 percent Palestinian Arab minority in the Jewish state, sufficient to cast deciding votes in the Knesset, sufficient, therefore, to prevent Israel from fulfilling its responsibilities to the Jewish people. Expulsion? Forget (if you can, if you insist) what being Jewish (or even human) requires of thee and all that. Simply picture the fracture of Israel's body politic and of the Jewish people, along with the demolition of Israel's stature in the family of nations. Foreign aid? Forget it. Tourism? Forget it. Israel does not need to take South Africa's place as the world's favorite and most deserving pariah.

Accordingly, you have to consider alternatives other than holding on to the land. And, in considering such alternatives, you have to weight the risks associated with them against the virtual certainties, all of them unpleasant, of holding the land.

That is what Rabin and Peres and their colleagues have done, and the actual terms of the agreement they have worked out reduce those risks to a minimum.

In this country, a number of Jews – Norman Podhoretz and the folks from Americans for a Safe Israel and a number of Orthodox rabbis – have quite vehemently attacked the agreement, arguing that Rabin et al. have miscalculated its risks. It is difficult to know quite what they propose as an alternative policy, but that in itself does not render their questions and objections inappropriate. There *are* risks associated with the new policy, and those who count themselves among the friends of Zion would betray their friendship were they to remain silent.

Those of us who insisted during the Begin/Shamir years that dissent from Israeli policy was not merely legitimate but actually productive, who believed that to stand with Israel one need not embrace the policies of its governors, ought allow for the questions and the objections and respond to them as best we can. In our years of dissent, we did not seek to "tell" Israel what to do, though that is what we were commonly accused of; we sought merely to express our deep concerns that its policies were folly. If the current policies strike others as equally wrong-headed, let them speak their piece (while we speak our peace). Perhaps this time around we can develop more mature habits of argument.

By "more mature," I mean an avoidance of the ad hominem, of the imputation of base motive (e.g., they are "headline-seekers"), of caricatured distortions of their position. Sweet as revenge might appear to be, it would be a waste of the opportunity to

experience our own peace process divide – a community that learns to conduct its arguments respectfully.