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The Jerusalem Post

September 23, 1993, Thursday

The big picture is bad

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HIGHLIGHT: Israel's future depends on realistic risk assessment, not hope. The writer served the Reagan administration as deputy assistant secretary of defense and a Middle East specialist on the National Security Council staff.

EVALUATING the Israel-PLO agreement requires weighing hopes against risks, for Israel's concessions could someday endanger its security.

The hopeful argument runs along the following lines: The concessions may actually pacify old enemies, removing the motive for attacks on Israel. A serious military or terrorist threat can develop in relinquished territories only if the specified security arrangements are violated, in which case Israel will promptly take remedial action. The agreement provides that Israel will remain responsible for defense against external threats and for the overall security of Israelis. And in all events, whatever the PLO's good faith or lack thereof, Israel is strong and can handle any threat from those territories.

One finds intense desire among Israelis that this first proposition will eventuate. But in a risk assessment, the essential question is not whether Israel would be safe if its enemies are appeased, but: What are the dangers if those enemies remain ambitious and hostile?

It is natural for the government to pledge rigorous enforcement of the security provisions of any peace agreement. Every party to a peace or arms control agreement makes such a pledge. But the record of such agreements between democratic and non-democratic countries calls for a discounting.

The World War I Allies said they would enforce the Versailles Treaty on demilitarizing the Rhineland. They didn't. Though the US government promised to enforce its arms-control agreements with the Soviet Union, Soviet violations were numerous, and the US did nothing but complain (and little of that). The Israeli government said it would insist on compliance with the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, but important problems have remained unresolved for years.

The pattern in such cases is that when the non-democratic party to the treaty violates the agreement, the democratic party - ever reluctant to provoke a confrontation - tends at first to ignore or belittle the evidence. Then it occasionally makes excuses for the other side, then says that the violations are unclear or, if clear, are not enormously important.

Those advocating a response to the violations are ridiculed as legalistic. Even if the violations are clear and important, the government of the democratic party will lament that its options are limited and unsatisfactory, for it certainly does not want to overreact. To be sure, it does not want to risk a war over an action by the other side that falls

short of immediate preparation for war. The upshot is that the violation often stands.

This is not to say that Israel will necessarily remain passive in the face of treaty violations. But, when the time comes, Israel will find that it is no easy matter to reverse such violations simply because it has the right to do so.

As for the proposition that Israeli strength ensures its ability to handle such threats, it is hard to contradict the point so long as current circumstances prevail: Egypt maintains peace with Israel; Iraq remains a stricken pariah; Syria lacks a powerful sponsor; Jordan is weak and cautious; the Palestinian Arabs are politically divided and financially strapped.

IN light of these favorable realities, it is likely that the IDF could secure the state against existential threats even if withdrawn from most of the territories and even if the new authorities there remain hostile to Israel. But this begs the question: Are the current circumstances permanent? If not, are they likely to change in desirable or undesirable ways?

Unfortunately, the big picture in the Middle East is deteriorating. The trends are not toward peaceful politics, liberal democracy, tolerance and prosperity. On the contrary, Islamist movements espousing medieval, anti-democratic enmity and jihad are gaining popularity.

Witness the electoral successes of Islamist parties in Jordan and Algeria, and the bloodbath underway in Egypt as "fundamentalist" groups murder officials, foreign tourists and Copts and the government responds with mass executions. Witness the Islamists' accession to power in Sudan, the power of Hizbullah in Lebanon, the rise of Hamas to rival the PLO for leadership among Palestinian Arabs, and the large-scale flight of Christians from many countries of the region. All these warn against assuming that the Middle East will be stable in coming years, or that Israel's concessions in the West Bank and Gaza can turn the tide of radical Islam.

The risks inherent in Israel's concessions must be assessed in light of the possibility, grim though realistic, that within five to 10 years, Khomeini-style Islamist regimes may be running Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and whatever new state is created for the Palestinian Arabs.

If this worst-case scenario materializes, the benefits adduced by proponents of territorial concessions may look downright meager against the resulting security threats. Israelis may find that the strains of occupation have been replaced by the greater strains of living within once-again-insecure boundaries.

Less territory, for example, means less mobilization time, which may necessitate a larger standing army and less reliance on reserves. And the increased danger of getting cut in half may require increased reliance on destabilizing preemption strategies.

National security analysts have to evaluate the risks of the Israel-PLO deal on the conservative assumption of continued hostility and increasing Islamist political power. From that point of view, the risks are grave, for they may affect the state's ability to protect its existence in war. And the legal safeguards intended to mitigate those risks can be expected to prove far less effective than hoped.

LOAD-DATE: September 27, 1993

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH