

26 of 48 DOCUMENTS

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'No alternative to peace'

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HIGHLIGHT: As a slogan, it actually diminishes chances for mutual accommodation. The author served as deputy assistant secretary of defense and as a Middle East specialist on the White House National Security Council staff during the Reagan administration. This article is adapted from an essay in the March 1996 issue of the Middle East Quarterly.

Israeli officials say they are relinquishing the West Bank and Gaza as part of a peace process in which Yasser Arafat and the Palestinians must fulfill their side of the bargain. Israeli forces, however, withdraw from one area after another despite the Arab side's failure to live up to its promises.

Is there logic behind this perplexing policy? There is: the logic of unilateral withdrawal. Though public pronouncements of Israeli officials emphasize peace and mutuality, unilateralism actually drives Israeli actions. In other words, there is an important gap between declared and actual policy.

When Israeli officials talk of separation rather than peace, they signal that the "peace process" is more in the nature of a unilateral Israeli withdrawal than a two-sided bargain.

In late 1993, government officials promised that if the PLO couldn't prevent terrorism, Israel would halt or reverse its withdrawal from the territories.

At the end of 1994, following several terrorist bombings in the heart of Israel, prime minister Yitzhak Rabin did not do this, but established government committees to look into methods to separate Israel from the territories with fences, walls, bypass roadways and the like. If the PLO could not prevent terrorism, he made clear, Israel would withdraw anyway, while experimenting with new ways to divorce itself from the Arabs.

Peace, of course, is different from divorce; indeed, in essential respects, divorce is the opposite of peace. Yet, Israeli officials switch back and forth between talk of conciliation and talk of constructing walls, as though it were all the same idea.

It matters that the word "peace" is misapplied, because treating the PLO as a partner in peace implies a different assessment of risks than does an essentially unilateral withdrawal premised on continued hostility and conflict. Withdrawals that may resolve the conflict require different analysis from those that simply change the lines from which Israel will have to continue to fight against hostile neighbors.

When reminded of his 1992 campaign promises not to negotiate with the PLO or facilitate creation of a Palestinian state, Rabin replied that Israel had "no alternative," explaining: "We had to choose between the Greater Land of Israel,

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which means a binational state whose populations would comprise, as of today, 4.5 million Jews and more than 3 million Palestinians... and a state smaller in area, but which would be a Jewish state. We chose to be a Jewish state."

Rabin implied Israel had only two choices, his negotiations with the PLO, or annexation of the territories with citizenship for the Arab inhabitants (i.e., a binational state).

But no Israeli political party, certainly not the Likud, proposed a binational state. None advocated annexation of the territories with citizenship for the Arab inhabitants. Government leaders distorted the picture to make those who opposed their dealings with the PLO appear fanatical and, of all things, un-Zionist.

Nor did Israel have to choose between Rabin's two options; it had at least one more.

In the years between 1967 and 1993, Israel neither relinquished the territories nor annexed them either embraced the PLO, nor granted the Arab inhabitants citizenship. Rather, it controlled the territories pending agreement with an appropriate Arab party. That policy was compatible both with Labor's wish to trade the territory for peace, and with the Likud's wish to grant autonomy but not sovereignty to the Arabs there.

Labeling those against handing over the territories to the PLO as enemies of peace and diluters of Israel's Jewish character showed just how swiftly and completely government officials had broken with the past. They thereby condemned not only Likud supporters, but also all those faithful to Labor's own 1992 election platform.

THE resonant slogan that "Israel has no alternative to peace" deserves attention.

"Peace" in its customary meaning requires two sides. Israel's having no alternative to peace implies Israel cannot survive without peace. This means Israel cannot survive without Arab consent, which means that, should Israel's neighbors withhold or revoke that consent, Israel will eventually cease to exist.

Israelis who repeat this idealistic-sounding slogan probably do not intend to say this, but that is the logic of their words. The slogan signals to Israel's antagonists that they can, if steadfast, wear down the Jewish state; and if they draw this conclusion, the slogan of "no alternative" actually diminishes the chances for mutual accommodation.

In short, Israel is less likely to win peace if its leaders proclaim that the country has no alternative to peace.

In debates about peace policies, Labor government supporters invariably ask critics: If you oppose the present course, what, then, is your solution?

But this challenge begs the question. Israel cannot have peace simply because its citizens desire it. Peace not being within Israelis' sole control, they cannot identify a solution irrespective of circumstances on the Arab side. Before peace is possible, Palestinian Arabs must develop both peaceable intentions and political institutions that have credibility and authority.

If these factors are missing, peace with the Palestinians will not be available, no matter how forthcoming Israeli policy might be.

Israel cannot compel good faith on the Arab side, nor can it ensure mature political leadership there.

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