

Israel At A Crossroads

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Palestine lies at the crossroads of Africa, Asia and Europe. This Land of Promise has witnessed the passing of millions of merchants, scores of migrations and hundreds of armies over the past 6,000 years. For much of its history, it has been the vortex around which the great empires have schemed and struggled. In addition, adherents of three major world religions—Christianity, Judaism and Islam—claim it as a holy land. Now the State of Israel finds itself at a different sort of crossroads.

The 1916 Balfour Declaration began a process that culminated in the founding of the Jewish nation in 1948. Carved out of the former British Mandate of Palestine, Israel faced immediate warfare from the surrounding Arab countries. It tenaciously survived, adding land, such as the Golan Heights, the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and Jerusalem, during its 1967 and 1973 wars against Egypt, Syria, and Jordan.

Throughout its struggle, Israel has also had to deal with a large and violent internal Arab population that has sworn to overthrow the Jewish "occupation." Countless terrorist activities have killed unknown numbers of civilians, soldiers, and political leaders, both Jew and Arab. In recent years, these Palestinians have sought and secured limited self-rule in the areas they dominate. This Palestinian Authority, led by Yassir Arafat, has a 30,000-man, armed police force and the backing of the Arab world and other nations abroad.

Now Israel is engaged in the so-called "Middle East peace process," a futile effort that cannot but end in war. In order to appease the Palestinians—and other interested parties—Israel has had to cede territory to its former owners. This has steadily whittled away at its "strategic depth," the land area necessary to maneuver to defend its population, making the Arabs more likely to consider Israel vulnerable and launch an attack. Several other "peace" process items also make the chances for war more rather than less likely.

Assad Ascendancy

Saturday, June 10, saw the addition of another wrinkle in Middle Eastern affairs, when President Hafez al-Assad of Syria died at age 69. Although his declining health was well known, most had not expected his demise to come so soon. Many Syrians, as well as leaders of surrounding nations, hoped he would have several more months, if not years, to groom his son Bashar—by training, an ophthalmologist—for the presidency.

Bashar's ascendancy has yet to prove helpful or harmful to Israel, and it could fall either way. His political inexperience may force him to work cautiously and deliberately to avoid mistakes. On the other hand, it could inspire his enemies—such as his uncle Rifaat, who has been living in exile abroad since 1986—to strike quickly before he can amass power.

At this point, Syrian political leaders and the average citizen appear to support Bashar. Parliament hastily voted to amend the minimum-age clause in the nation's constitution to allow the 34-year-old

to become president. The day after his father's death, he was declared commander of Syria's armed forces and nominated as Baath Party president. Parliament will meet on June 25 to rubberstamp his nomination as the nation's chief executive, and a shoo-in general referendum should soon follow.

One of Bashar's jobs in recent months has been to root out corruption in the Syrian government. More cynical observers say that it has less to do with corruption than in smoking out political enemies. A mid-June report published in Lebanon's pro-Syrian newspaper *As-Safir* quotes Syrian Vice President Abdel-Halim Khaddam as saying the past few years have seen an increase in corruption and a decline in respect for law and accountability. Diplomats in the region saw this as a signal that Bashar's anti-corruption campaign will continue into his presidency.

Israeli officials, both political and military, are carefully monitoring their borders with Syria and Lebanon and keeping a weather eye on Damascus. "We don't see anything unusual, so we're not going to do anything unusual from our side," said an anonymous military official. Prime Minister Ehud Barak remarked that Israel has no reason to take any special measures: "We are alertly monitoring [the situation], and we will know to do what is good for Israel."

Peace talks between Israel and Syria broke down in January because of disagreements over Israel's territorial concessions. Israeli leaders do not think new talks will commence any time soon, expecting Bashar to focus on consolidating his position. Privately, many Israelis both in and out of government hope that Bashar's European education will make him more open to peace than his father. Even Barak feels that "this won't be the same Syria" with the younger Assad at the helm. Speaking to a group of retired defense officials on June 14, the Prime Minister stated that, once he stabilizes his rule, Bashar will bring "substantial" economic, diplomatic and cultural improvements to Syria.

Barak's Bane

Whether this is wishful thinking or good intelligence remains to be seen. However, Barak has more pressing problems inside his own borders.

Since his election in July 1999, Barak has been forced to cobble together a coalition government. His primary coalition partner has been the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, strange bedfellows for his own center-left One Israel party. One Israel holds only 26 seats in the 120-seat Knesset, while Shas holds 17 and the balance of power in the coalition. Shas has made use of its position by holding Barak hostage to its demands, to which the latter has acceded by making last-minute concessions.

Now Shas has announced that it will leave the government if Barak does not prop up the party's bankrupt school system. Shas charges that its pupils receive less state funding than others do, while the education ministry demands more oversight powers. The Shas system has been plagued by huge budget shortfalls and mismanagement, including the suspension of its director for fiscal impropriety.

If Shas quits the coalition, Israel could be thrown into political turmoil, and the peace process would freeze immediately. Barak would then have the option of calling new elections or trying to patch together a new coalition. If he decided to do the latter, he would have to make a deal with the opposition Likud party or entice a number of smaller parties to join the present coalition. None of these three options is appealing.

In addition to his Knesset troubles, Barak must also worry about man on the street. A recent poll, taken immediately after the Knesset voted 61-48 on a preliminary measure to dissolve itself and call

new elections, found that 52 percent of the Israeli public, including Arabs, want an immediate general election. What may be more shocking to Barak is that only 43 percent said they would vote for him as opposed to 33 percent for Likud leader Ariel Sharon. Twenty-four percent were undecided.

The Knesset is very much representative of the divisions in the nation. Because Israel is comprised of Jews from many different parts of the world—Arab nations, Africa, Russia, Europe, South America, the United States and elsewhere—as well as Palestinians, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to forge a national consensus on any matter. Some groups, albeit on the fringe, are even hinting at future civil war if their grievances are not met. Were a civil war to occur, Israel would not long survive, and these fringe groups know it. It is only this fact that keeps the lid on internal squabbles.

Territorial Tango

Israel faces a terrible catch-22: If it refuses to cooperate in the land-for-peace process, it risks riling the surrounding Arab nations to war. If it cooperates and gives up land, it risks encouraging the surrounding Arab nations to strike a weakened Jewish state. Even if it walks a fine line between cooperation and obstruction, it risks reigniting the Palestinian intifada that has taken so many civilian lives in the past.

Over the past several years, Israel has retreated from areas it had won on the field of battle, leaving Jewish settlers huddled in fortress-like enclaves surrounded by hostile Palestinians. Left to itself, Israel would never have made such generous concessions—if at all—but heavy international pressure combined with weak, dovish, "peace at all costs" prime ministers has forced its hand. Once Israel began conceding land, the Palestinians have continued to push for more. In this situation, the old adage, "Give him an inch, and he'll take a mile," becomes literal.

In late May, Israel hastily withdrew from the territory it had occupied in southern Lebanon for 22 years. Its military presence there had created and secured a vital buffer zone to its north, protecting Galilee and the Jezreel Valley. The withdrawal, done for political rather than military reasons, leaves its northern border vulnerable to Syrian and terrorist attack. Hezbollah, the Shiite Muslim terrorist group based in southern Lebanon and supported by Iran, says it will not disarm as long as Israel remains a threat—that is, as long as Israel still exists.

Stratfor, a global intelligence service in Austin, Texas, believes Israel's withdrawal is a sign of the nation's "maturity." It no longer deals with every threat militarily, recognizing that it can manage some of its enemies, especially its "minor irritants," through other means. Under Barak, Israel is relying more on political arrangements rather than military solutions. In doing so, it is setting up a structure of subtle arrangements between itself and its enemies with which it shares certain common interests.

The withdrawal from Lebanon is a good example of this. Syria considers Lebanon a part of itself that French imperialism pinched off. It already dominates Lebanese affairs, but the Israeli withdrawal gives Syria free rein throughout all of Lebanon, including dealing with Hezbollah. The nominally Sunni Muslim Assad family actually has a closer political and economic relationship with the Lebanese Christian Maronite faction than to Hezbollah, a Palestinian Shiite group. The Israeli political and military hierarchy concluded that withdrawing from southern Lebanon would reduce Israel's exposure to harm (since Hezbollah's ability to harm Israelis inside Israel is minimal) and allow Syria to clamp down on the terrorist group instead.

As matters stand, it seems like a pragmatic move. Whether it will come back to haunt Israel, time will tell.

Jerusalem Jockeying

The most sensitive issue of all is Jerusalem. Both the Israelis and Palestinians claim it as their capital, and Jews, Muslims and Christians call it a holy city and demand rights in it. No peace will be final without this Gordian knot being solved.

Humanly, it will not be solved. In late May, Israel offered to withdraw from 90 percent of the West Bank but nothing about Jerusalem. Yassir Arafat refused the deal because it did not give back all the territory from the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Israel wants to leave as many of its settlers in the West Bank as possible—as many as 150,000 of the current 200,000—so the chances of it offering to concede 100 percent of the West Bank are negligible.

As the West Bank negotiations become thornier, the division over the Jerusalem question becomes more severe. As peace talks moved to Washington in mid-June, Prime Minister Barak instructed his negotiators not to discuss Jerusalem at all in this round. In contrast, the speaker of the Palestinian National Council, Salim al-Zanun, said that Israel must not only turn East Jerusalem over to Palestinian control, but also 70 percent of West Jerusalem! Israelis would never agree to such a "solution."

The status of Jerusalem is one of the key elements that will move events toward the end-time troubles and Christ's return. God says in Zechariah 12:3, "And it shall happen in that day that I will make Jerusalem a very heavy stone for all peoples; all who would heave it away will surely be cut in pieces, though all nations of the earth are gathered against it." The many sides in the dispute are and will be so far apart that "the surrounding peoples . . . [will] lay siege against Judah and Jerusalem" (verse 2).

Evidently, God will purposefully create confusion in the situation: "'Behold, I will make Jerusalem a cup of drunkenness [*reeling*, margin] to all. . . . In that day,' says the LORD, 'I will strike every horse [a military symbol] with confusion, and its rider with madness'" (verses 2, 4). If current events seem upside-down today, it appears only to become worse.

Nevertheless, though the nations of the earth come against them, the people and leaders of Judah will retain a great part of their military strength, yet trust in God for their victory (verses 5-8). God will help them to

devour all the surrounding peoples on the right hand and on the left. . . . The LORD will save the tents of Judah first [before the city of Jerusalem]. . . . In that day the LORD will defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem; the one who is feeble among them in that day shall be like David [in military prowess]. . . . It shall be in that day that I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem (verses 6-9).

It is only after this, however, that God will open salvation to the Jews, and they will repent and embrace the true Messiah with great contrition and zeal (Zechariah 12:10-14; 13:1-6). The wording of verse 10 suggests that their conversion occurs after Christ's return, when they can actually see Him

"whom they have pierced." Until that time, their trust in God will be substantially Judaic. It may be that in the near future, Israel will throw off its current secular character and become considerably more religious. If so, sparks will indeed fly in the Levant.

All signs today point to Israel quickly approaching a crossroads where it must decide which path to take. Will it continue to appease the Arabs? Will it continue to trust in the United States for support? Will it continue to act as a secular state, denying its Judaic heritage? No matter what it decides, we can be sure that the road it chooses will be the one down which the crisis at the close of this age occurs.