

The Middle East Coefficient: Back to Reality

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On the basis of the “Begin Rule,” invented just a few days ago, if international expectation with regard to any specific issue can be given the value of 60, the result in the Middle East will be 30. In other words, the value is half, often even zero. Below are some examples testing this rule of the Middle East coefficient.

At first we thought that the victory of the March 14 camp in Lebanon in June 2009 was an exception to this rule – a grand victory for the good guys – thanks to great efforts, European support, American support, and a massive infusion of Saudi money. Yet a few days ago, when the parliament in Beirut gave the new Hariri government its vote of confidence, it approved the government’s basic principles, including the weapon of resistance. Thus the June victory has evaporated, and despite various fluctuations and trends over the past six months, the internal logic of the Begin Rule is intact. Nothing is new in Lebanon; Syria has continued to control events there with a great deal of patience. In fact, the collapse of the June electoral victory began at the meeting between King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and Bashar Asad. That is when Lebanon was sold out to Syria, and we are left with 40,000 rockets tightly controlled by Iran and with smuggling across the Syrian border that strengthens Hezbollah. In recent weeks we have heard statements, for example from Europe, trying to make an artificial, unrealistic distinction between two branches of Hezbollah: the military and the political. I would propose not to grant legitimacy to this threatening anomaly by such an artificial distinction. These circumstances place the full burden of accountability on the Lebanese government as it is.

On the international arena, there were expectations of the Annapolis process in late 2007 and 2008, at least on the declarative level. One

expectation that for some reason arises repeatedly is that the members of the Arab League would supply a political envelope and enable the PLO to retract political ambitions it has adopted and continues to adopt. These expectations, however, are never fulfilled and stand no chance of ever being fulfilled. After all, the Arab peace initiative, emphasizing the right of refugees to return to Israel itself, is a change that was made to the original text of the Saudi initiative as a result of Syrian pressure. Here too we see that the value of the Middle East coefficient is zero, because the result was zero.

If we want to avoid a situation in which the Middle East coefficient is again zero, we have to learn the lessons of the last failure in the negotiations between Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and the PLO leadership. Because things were not made public, it took me quite some time to understand fully the proposal Prime Minister Olmert presented to Abu Mazen at some point in 2008. If one puts the data together primarily on the basis of two sources, one being Abu Mazen and the other being Ehud Olmert, here is the picture that emerges. In Abu Mazen's understanding, Ehud Olmert agreed to accept the principle of the right of return. He agreed to a withdrawal from 98 percent of the area including Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip. In an interview Abu Mazen granted to Jackson Diehl of the *Washington Post* he talks about 97 percent, but that is from Judea and Samaria, because the Gaza Strip withdrawal – or perhaps one should more accurately say abandonment – including the Philadelphi axis already took place in 2005. So that creates close to 98 percent. As for the remaining 2 percent, there was an agreement about land swaps, to use the diplomatic jargon, so that in practice it came to 100 percent.

To this, Ehud Olmert added, once to *Newsweek* and once to *The Australian*, a widely distributed paper in Australia, that he proposed the establishment of a Palestinian state in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip, as well as safe passage between Gaza and Judea by means of a tunnel under Israeli sovereignty. In addition, he proposed that a part of East Jerusalem would be the capital of the Palestinian state, while Israel would concede its sovereignty over the Holy Basin – the Temple Mount, the Mount of Olives, and the City of David. Instead of Israeli sovereignty over these parts of the city, they would be managed by an international consortium that would include Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the PLO, and the United States.

Abu Mazen rejected the formula Ehud Olmert proposed. The least one can say is that he did not accept it. When I tell people that he rejected it they say to me that he didn't exactly reject it. And then they go on to explain that in fact, at the time Prime Minister Olmert was just a lame duck and there was no point in talking to him, and all sorts of various and sundry excuses. However, it is time to learn the lesson from this. The reason for the failure of the negotiations, despite the far reaching concessions offered by Prime Minister Olmert, is not some triviality having to do with summer heat or winter rains, but rather with the PLO's perpetual, stubborn clinging to the fundamentals of its policy.

In an essay I published recently, I stressed my sense of the significance of the agreement outlined by the PLO in the decisions of the Sixth PLO Convention that met in Bethlehem. Then, too, the expectations were high. The conference decisions state that the objective of the PLO is the liberation of Palestine by means of eradicating the Zionist entity. I asked a number of European diplomats with whom I'm in contact, "Let's assume that in your country the ruling party convenes and before the upcoming elections proposes to add to its platform, 'All Muslims must be deported from the country without delay.' After a compromise is reached, the formulation reads, 'All Muslims must be deported at a time to be determined.' Would this be acceptable to you? Would you say that these were just words, that this is something acceptable?"

Let me share what I learned years ago from my father and teacher. He told me about a custom from the nineteenth century: when young men from the Ottoman Empire were sent to institutions of higher learning at the universities of Europe, their diplomas – this is an historical fact – would be stamped with a special notation, i.e., this is good for the Middle East. Perhaps for that level this is sufficient. Yet this is a patronizing approach still embraced by some of our friends. They say, "Look, it's not serious, that's what they're like, understand them." This flies in the face of the standards they apply to any other nation. It is not acceptable for a ruling party, glorying in its stability on the basis of elections to reach such a decision. We're seeing a return to the most extreme decisions; this is their way.

If this is the trend and it is demanded that we grant refugees both the right of return and compensation, and if we receive a flat refusal to accept

Israel as the state of the Jewish people: these positions are not surprising, and do not represent any kind of dissonance with or among the leadership. This is the leadership; this is its way; this is its opinion. If we are talking about expectations, here are the PLO's expectations of the future as Saeb Erakat, the PLO's negotiator, expressed them about six months ago: "How far did negotiations with the Israelis go? At first they told us that we would run hospitals and schools. Then they were prepared to give 66 percent. At Camp David they got to 90 percent and today we're talking about 100 percent. In that case, why should we be in a hurry after all the injustices we have suffered?"

Indeed, why hurry? I think that each of us must humbly acknowledge that there is something to what he says. The PLO demands that the negotiations resume at exactly the point at which they were stopped. In other words, in addition to the terms offered to them they will make more demands. So the expectation is not to get 100 percent, but 106, 112, and 131.5 percent of all the demands. Therefore, obviously, we need to go back to the Middle East coefficient and conclude that here too it will equal zero.

It is impossible to meet Palestinian expectations such as these. There is no Zionist party, small or large, even the most liberal and forthcoming party in the world, that can arrive at an agreement with the PLO in the foreseeable future as long as it does not change its platform. Abu Mazen claims that Ehud Olmert gave him too little, and Tzipi Livini claims that Ehud Olmert gave him too much. I do not see how a mediator would come between these two poles and manage to bring the parties to an agreement. Therefore, the clearest job for peaceniks around the world at this point is much easier than they think. Whoever wants to reach an agreement that any Zionist in Israel could agree to is obligated to demand consistently that the PLO change its political program from the ground up. Otherwise there is no hope. Otherwise we will continue to go around and around. Perhaps we could start negotiations but they would end the same way as all preceding negotiations.

Generally speaking, the world rejects the Begin Rule. Even when people are informed – and this is one of the fascinating things about human behavior – they refuse to adjust their expectations to reality. Hence expectations, misunderstandings, disappointments, letdowns, and we start all over again. Everyone agrees that there is no solution. And after everyone

agrees that there is no solution, people start suggesting solutions. But the solutions are totally cut off from the basic assumptions that led to the true conclusion that there is no solution. Yet that's the reality. I suggest that in order to disprove the Begin Rule and start reaching somewhat higher values for the Middle East coefficient, it is necessary to lower expectations to a level of reasonable plus, at least for this part of the world.

I think that a possible conclusion from the above is that it is necessary to maintain our might and our operational freedom of action. We cannot agree to a determination of the end of the negotiations before they have started. We cannot accept preconditions for negotiations. It is impossible to differentiate artificially, as some of our friends do, between preconditions for negotiations and what they call setting the parameters for negotiations, which really means dictating the negotiation results ahead of time. This is both unreasonable and unacceptable. It is necessary to be very precise on this, and this of course is part of the government's responsibility.

I would suggest another conclusion, and it too is unpleasant. We must be very careful with the advice we get from our friends, as some of the advice – such as the participation of Hamas in the 2006 elections – results in outcomes that our friends don't have to live with. Here too we must simply insist on our own version, because we cannot concede Israel's national interests. Not all of Israel's national interests are purely security related. Indeed, some refer, in theory and in practice, to what the Israeli Declaration of Independence calls the natural and historic right to our land. Some of Israel's national interests rest on our connection to the hills on which our ancestors trod and from which our prophets prophesied. After all, there will be no dispute that the importance of the Temple Mount does not lie in its strategic location overlooking the Kidron Valley. And the importance of the City of David does not stem from the possibility of using Hezekiah's Tunnel as a public bomb shelter. The same applies to Shiloh, Hebron, and Beit El.