



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Recognition of Jewish Israel is Critical for Palestinians

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaacov Amidror

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 242, April 7, 2014

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Since the signing of the Oslo accords twenty years ago, Israel has adjusted its diplomatic positions significantly towards the Palestinians, while the Palestinians have not moved one millimeter towards Israel on any issue. This pattern of Palestinian inflexibility explains Prime Minister Netanyahu's insistence that Palestinian negotiators state clearly that they understand the end-game of talks is to create a Jewish State of Israel alongside an Arab Palestinian state. If an accord between Israel and the Palestinians does not include Palestinian recognition of Israel as the nation state of the Jews – such an accord will not be worth the paper it is written on.

Any discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations must begin with the following observation: Since the signing of the Oslo accords twenty years ago, Israel has adjusted its diplomatic positions significantly towards the Palestinians, while the Palestinians have not moved one millimeter towards Israel on any issue. Israel has made giant strides towards the Palestinians, while the Palestinians have obdurately upheld a position of no compromise with Israel. Unfortunately, the world fails to give Israel any credit for the lengths that it has been prepared to go for peace.

To illustrate the changes in Israel's positions over the two decades since Israel signed the Declaration of Principles in September 1993, it is instructive to begin with the words of former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Rabin was the main Israeli signatory to the Declaration of Principles and the Israel-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Oslo II).

In his final speech to the Knesset in October 1995, just two weeks before he was tragically assassinated, Rabin presented the agreement to the Knesset and specified that Israel's vision for those talks was a Palestinian "entity" which would be "less than a

state." The prime minister stated explicitly that Israel would "not return to the June 4, 1967 lines" and pledged that Israel would retain control over the Jordan Valley "in the broadest meaning of that term." He also explicitly stated that Israel would not freeze building in the settlements.

Compare Rabin's policy to the stated negotiating stances of today's Israeli prime minister. Binyamin Netanyahu now says openly that he would accept a Palestinian state, and insists upon Israeli military forces "along the Jordan River." We don't know exactly what that means, but we know it means something other than full sovereignty, and less than what Rabin intended.

Rabin never spoke of 'compensating' Palestinians with pre-1967 Israeli land for settlement blocs over the Green Line that Israel intends to keep. Now, for some reason, it has become almost the accepted expectation that Israel will compensate the Palestinian state for settlement bloc land.

Tactically, too, Israel's positions have changed. Prime Minister Rabin pledged never to release Palestinian prisoners convicted of murder. Prime Minister Netanyahu has released three groups of killers, not in exchange for an agreement, but rather as a "confidence-building measure" intended merely to bring Palestinian representatives to the negotiating table.

At the same time, Palestinian goals and demands have remained consistent throughout the Oslo period. They have made no concessions whatsoever over the past twenty years.

Just this week, I held a conversation with 35 Western diplomats, many of whom have been involved for years in Israeli-Palestinian affairs. I asked them to identify for me one Palestinian diplomatic concession or other significant diplomatic flexibility over the past twenty years. They hemmed and hawed and thought for a while, until one of the diplomats said: "Well, Abu Mazen has agreed to an Israel security presence in the Jordan Valley for 3-5 years."

That is the only Palestinian "concession" over 20 years that these diplomats could identify, and this "concession" is, of course, meaningless.

In the context of the current round of negotiations, this pattern of Palestinian inflexibility explains Prime Minister Netanyahu's critical demand that Palestinian negotiators state clearly that they understand that the endgame of talks is to create a Jewish state of Israel alongside the Arab Palestinian state. We don't mean an amorphous, undefined "Israel," as the PLO recognized in 1993, but a clearly defined Jewish country on the other side of the border from the Palestinian state. If it is easier for

our adversaries to swallow, another formulation of this might be that Israel is "the nation state of the Jewish people."

Ironically, Israel would not be the main beneficiary of such a statement. We have little need for Palestinian "recognition" of our right to live in this land. The moral, historical and legal justice of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel is beyond doubt or serious debate.

Rather, Palestinian recognition of the permanence of the Jewish state is critical – first-and-foremost for the Palestinians. Palestinian leaders and lay people alike must begin to come to terms with this reality, primarily by speaking about it in public and beginning to educate their younger generation based on this.

Indeed, my involvement in the negotiations and in private meetings with Palestinians over the past year has made it clear to me that the diplomatic process is not about "land for peace." It is not about the 1967 borders, but about unpacking the conflict between Israel and Palestinians going back to 1948. Thus, if an accord between Israel and the Palestinians does not include Palestinian recognition of Israel as the nation state of the Jews – such an accord will not be worth the paper it is written on.

I think it worthwhile to note that from a certain point of view, the Palestinian position is understandable. There is no example in the history of mankind in which a people returned to its ancestral land after a 2,000-year exile. The Palestinians, then, are correct to ask why, if there is no precedent for the primary goal of Zionism, their nation should have to bow before the only example of an ancient people returning to its land.

This is precisely the reason why it is critical for Palestinians to say openly and clearly that the result of an Israeli-Palestinian peace process is a Jewish state alongside a Palestinian state. It is essential that a peace deal, if one is signed, will include full Palestinian recognition that traditional Palestinian claims vis-à-vis 1948 Israel are closed, forever. Such a declaration will surely be difficult.

Palestinian negotiators object to Netanyahu's insistence that they recognize Israel as a Jewish state because they say it is a "new" Israeli demand designed to prevent any peace deal from emerging.

That is not true. Yitzhak Rabin understood the importance of this issue. That is why he demanded the amendment of clauses in the PLO Charter. Former Prime Minister Barak understood it again at Camp David when he offered to sign a deal with Yasser Arafat provided the latter accepted that the deal ended all Palestinian claims ("finality of conflict"). Both leaders well understood that the amorphous, undefined PLO "recognition" of Israel in 1993 was not enough, because it left room for Palestinian

leaders to entertain the thought that the two-states-for-two-peoples formula could actually be reworked to create two-states-for-one-people.

That concern continues to trouble the current prime minister – with his strong sense of history – and it is the reason he has made this issue a central one. For the current negotiations to have any meaning at all, the Palestinians must acknowledge that the goal of the talks is to enshrine the permanence of a Jewish State of Israel alongside a Palestinian state – for the Palestinians' sake and for the sake of real peace.

Major General (res.) Yaacov Amidror joined the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies this month as the Anne and Greg Rosshandler Senior Fellow. This paper is based on his inaugural talk at the BESA Center on March 27.

Until the end of 2013, General Amidror served as National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister of Israel and chairman of the National Security Council. Previously, he served as commander of the IDF Military Colleges, military secretary to the Minister of Defense, and director of the Intelligence Analysis Division in IDF Military Intelligence.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity
of the Greg Rosshandler Family