

Introduction

The Focus

In the Six Day War of June 1967, Israeli forces defeated the combined armies of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, in the process conquering substantial areas and doubling the size of the territory under Israel's control. In the lyrics of a Hebrew folk song that became popular during the war, a soldier returning from the battle tells his young daughter, "I promise you, my little girl, that this will be the last war." This expressed the sentiment shared by many Israelis during the euphoric weeks that followed the stunning victory of 1967. However, this was not to be the last war. Over the course of almost thirty years since, Israel has fought three more major wars, suffered scores of guerrilla attacks, and confronted in the occupied territories a popular uprising known as the Intifada.¹

During the decade that followed the 1967 war, Israel was governed by parliamentary coalitions dominated by the Labor Party. In principle Labor supported the "Land for Peace" formula as incorporated in United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, which refers to an Israeli withdrawal from "territories occupied in the war" in exchange for peace. This famous resolution became the departure point for subsequent negotiations.

During this same period a strong grass-roots peace movement appeared in Israel, and a dialogue with Israel's enemies gradually became part of the political landscape. A peace treaty between Israel and Egypt was achieved by the government of Menachem Begin in 1979, dramatically altering the terms of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The psychological barriers to peace began to erode

as the treaty demonstrated that peace could, in fact, be achieved between bitter adversaries on terms acceptable to both. In the short term, however, the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty did little to alter the core conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis and failed to induce any of the other Arab states to end their belligerency toward Israel.

Twenty-seven years after the Six Day War a cautious experiment in Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation began. On September 13, 1993, the Israeli prime minister and the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization signed a Declaration of Principles, and Israeli troops began to withdraw from Gaza and Jericho. After numerous delays, serious negotiations began between Israel and its Arab neighbors. In a festive ceremony near Aqaba in October 1994, Israel and Jordan signed a peace treaty and ended the state of war that had existed between them since 1948. Although yet to bear fruit, negotiations between Israel and another neighbor, Syria, are continuing. Meanwhile, despite bloody opposition and political uncertainty, the Israeli-Palestinian experiment moves forward, with negotiations on an ultimate settlement scheduled to begin in May 1996.

As one watches old adversaries take these long-overdue steps toward peace, a difficult question presents itself: Could reconciliation have been achieved earlier? Why did it take more than a quarter century after the Six Day War, and tremendous costs in human and economic terms on all sides, before the parties began to talk seriously about peace?

Obviously, numerous factors contributed to the success or failure of the various peace initiatives undertaken over the years. For many years the Palestinian national movement adhered to radical positions, insisting on the elimination of Zionism and the Jewish state. Over time the views of many Palestine Liberation Organization leaders moderated as they recognized that although it may have been satisfying to speak of Israel's destruction through Palestinian armed struggle, this strategy was unlikely to prove successful. The United States was involved in the peace process, but not always with the necessary resolve and consistency. Superpower rivalry in the Middle East made Israel and the Arab states valuable Cold War clients, but at times it was the clients who guided the regional policies of their patrons rather than the converse. The Arab states, especially Egypt, had to restore their national dignity following the 1967 defeat before they could feel confident enough to begin the process of reconciliation. From 1977 to 1992 successive Israeli governments were either headed by or included the Likud party. Many within the Likud were committed to maintaining Israel's control over the occupied territories, which they viewed as parts of the historical Greater Land of Israel. Finally, the Palestinians needed the psychological and moral victory provided by the Intifada.

The object of this book is not to pass judgment on who was most or least responsible for blocking the road to peace, nor is it to present a history of the conflict or to describe the evolving peace process. The subject of this study is more limited, and centers on an examination of what is generically referred to as Israel's peace movement, its development, and the role it played in Israel's pursuit of peace. Domestic, regional, and international factors and events are incorporated into the study only as they relate to the efforts and reactions of the peace movement. Such events are examined from the perspective of the political and psychological environment within which the peace movement operated.

This does not mean that the conditions that developed were created exclusively by the individuals and groups mentioned in this study. The history of Israeli peace politics and diplomacy is primarily a story of governmental and parliamentary decision making, and this requires a separate study. However, as we try to demonstrate, the peace movement constituted a salient factor that influenced the political process.

The reader will recognize two constants that were present throughout the history of the peace movement: differences of opinion, and organizational fragmentation. This study describes a variety of peace groups and their leaders, who at times held divergent and even conflicting opinions and sometimes pursued very different strategies. However, focusing on the controversies that frequently occurred within the movement may distort the broader picture. Despite the debates that sometimes divided the movement, a unity of purpose and vision of a common goal prevailed. This study attempts to describe and explain these dynamics.

Bias and Objectivity

This book was written by an Israeli who was personally involved in many of the events described in it. In 1968, after serving for twenty years in the Israeli Defense Forces, I was elected to head the Youth Department of the World Zionist Organization. In this position my responsibilities included working with Jewish youth who subscribed to a very broad range of political and ideological perspectives. This responsibility demanded objectivity in my decision making and required that (as also during my years of military service) I restrain the public expression of my personal political views.

When I retired in 1978 and began to pursue academic interests, I felt free to express my own political and ideological convictions. My two eldest daughters, Einat and Tal, were already active in Peace Now, having joined the relatively new but large and influential peace group at its inception. I soon joined

them and have been an active member ever since. When I entered the movement I was considerably older than the average activist. Although I did not participate in its day-to-day activities, I regularly attended the street demonstrations and accepted special assignments the movement's leaders asked me to undertake. Consequently, I was present at many of the events described in this study and occasionally played a leading role in them. I was also one of the founders of the International Center for Peace in the Middle East and participated in many dialogues with Palestinian leaders. Throughout this period I actively engaged in the seemingly endless political and ideological debates within Israeli society and within the peace movement itself.

As an insider who participated in many of the events described in this study, I recognize the potential dangers of bias and subjectivity. However, these must be weighed against the advantages of intimate knowledge and understanding of the issues here addressed. In approaching this study I recognized that I could not—and therefore did not attempt to—anesthetize my sympathies with those individuals and groups who like myself sought to promote peace between Arabs (especially the Palestinians) and Israelis. However, I have tried to be fair to all parties and to describe personalities and events as objectively as possible. The reader may judge whether I have succeeded. One bias that I freely admit is my devout belief that it is a vital national interest—and a moral obligation—for Israel to resolve the hundred-year conflict with its Arab neighbors.

Clearly, this study is one-sided in another way too. It tells the story primarily from the Israeli perspective. To tell the story in its entirety, another study is necessary, one that will describe and analyze the pursuit of peace inside the Palestinian national movement. Such a study, I believe, will be better undertaken by a Palestinian. The story I tell here, though it occasionally touches on the “other side,” concentrates on the Israeli side and thus remains incomplete.

Some Methodological Considerations

The organization of this book is mainly chronological. The first chapter is dedicated to a few “peaceniks” who were active in the 1950s and 1960s and examines why no significant peace movement existed in the first two decades of Israeli statehood. The story becomes more detailed after the 1967 war. The flow of the narrative is interrupted at times to discuss specific factors in Israeli politics and society that influenced the peace movement. The study ends on September 13, 1993, with the signing of the Declaration of Principles on the White House lawn. This ceremony was

followed by negotiations between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization concerning Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and Jericho, and the transfer of authority over parts of the West Bank to Palestinian self-rule. However, though the peace movement certainly did not cease its activities in September 1993, these events are beyond the scope of this study, and I offer only a few tentative reflections on the future of the peace process and peace movement in conclusion.

The account given here of the activities of the peace movement is (as the endnotes testify) based heavily on primary sources. The movement conducted itself with little secrecy. In fact, with its leaders always eager to attract media attention, the movement considered transparency to be a great advantage. I had full access to the archives and personal files of groups and individuals associated with the movement. Additionally, I conducted many interviews, which provided me with valuable information and insight. (Details are given in the bibliography.)

Those parts of the narrative that deal with international developments are based chiefly on press reports, memoirs, and various secondary sources. Most of these events have been discussed and analyzed at length elsewhere; for the purposes of this study these developments are relevant only in terms of how they were perceived and acted on by Israeli peace activists.

Many of the commentaries available on the peace movement are in the form of newspaper and magazine reports and articles. Only a small amount of academic research has been undertaken and published so far.² I hope the original contribution of this study is to be found in its scope, in terms of both the time frame and the number of groups examined. Perhaps the descriptions, explanations, and analysis offered here will provide the reader with a better understanding of the forces that shaped public opinion and eventually made it possible for leaders such as Begin, Rabin, and Peres to travel the road to peace.

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This is essentially the story of how a limited number of Israelis over the past three decades perceived their situation and its effects on the future of their state and how, despite the prevailing consensus to the contrary, they unequivocally advocated political and territorial compromise in pursuit of peace. They took upon themselves the task of persuading their fellow Israelis to accept their perceptions and prescriptions. This study recounts how a group of dedicated men and women tried to construct peace in the minds of many.

