

Hebron Post-mortem

January 27, 1997

[Letter from Jerusalem]

Dear Friends,

Recently I read someone (quoting Kissinger, I think) who said that middle-east negotiations never end in euphoria, but rather exhaustion. Well following the Hebron negotiations from Jerusalem certainly was exhausting, and while I've no euphoria to report, there is actually a fair degree of optimism floating around Israelis of the near left, "moderate" center and center, and in the limited Palestinian circles I have personal access to. The far left here, whom I fear is right, is far less sanguine. Actually I think the optimists are more realistic, it's just that I've come to distrust realistic assessments as predictive of Israeli reality. After all, this is a country of high prices, low salaries and a large middle class with homes bursting with consumer goods. (When I ask how this is done the answers range from "overdrafts" to "it's a land of miracles," to a shrug).

But let's to the realistic, optimistic scenario: after years of proclaiming that the peace process was "irreversible" the peace camp, secretly fearing that this irreversibility claim was half wishful thinking half propaganda, was pleased to receive convincing evidence that it might be true. (I know after years of nodding assent to the claim that there was no way the US could win the war in Vietnam, I was surprised at the completeness and suddenness of the defeat--but of course Watergate helped). The Knesset endorsed the Accords in an 87 to 18 vote or thereabouts. The "not an inch" ideology of the Likud party has given way to a Likud sponsored agreement which formally obligates Israel to relinquish to Palestinian authority at least 50% of the West Bank within a year and a half. The idea of a Palestinian State, which from personal experience I can tell you marked one as a wild radical, enemy of Israel and a self-hating Jew only a few years ago, is now Labor policy, advocated by a faction of Likud, toyed with by Netanyahu, and is believed to be inevitable by most Israelis. Netanyahu's election is increasingly getting the "Nixon in China" and "blessing in disguise" analysis. Quite correctly, people believe a Labor led pullout from Hebron and most of the West Bank would have brought the far right into the streets (perhaps even with at least a few guns blazing). Politically supported by half the Knesset (the half who would claim, without any p.c. embarrassment to represent a "Jewish majority"), Israeli society would be in a shamble and the peace process would be impeded by the threat of something resembling a Civil War. Instead Israel has a government whom no one can plausibly accuse of wanting to win Nobel Peace prizes or of being indifferent to Israeli security needs--and even the scion of Betar recognizes that Israel must continue with Oslo. If once in office, confronted with business, world, American, Israeli, Arab,

Palestinian and expert opinions, --not to mention various actors capabilities, --Mr. Tough on Terror has to make Peace--well then there really must be no alternative. The mainstream left sees Bibi as an opportunist who understands that Oslo is the only opportunity available. The mainstream right sees him as an Israeli patriot who believes, now that he sees the lay of the land, that proceeding with Oslo is in Israel's best interests. Whatever the cause, Netanyahu's and Likud's acceptance of Oslo represents an Israeli national consensus for a territorial compromise and peace with the Palestinians, the political isolation of the far right and the inevitability of the occupations' end. The rest are details.

Palestinian optimism has some additional features. Of course, they are pleased to see that Oslo has provided them with the leverage to require even Netanyahu to deal with them. Indeed, Netanyahu's election is viewed by some as having increased Palestinian power in the negotiations. Firstly, he is clearly an inexperienced player in this game. He gave up far more in the Hebron negotiations than Peres or Rabin would have. Instead of conceding things when they could have wrung a Palestinian concession, his delays made Israel concede items when they could no longer exact a price. Netanyahu had none of Rabin/Peres good will. The international onus is completely on him too prove good faith. Moreover his fawning on these gun-toting, violent, provocative, fundamentalist fanatics dancing in the streets of Hebron, along with his own past and present attitudes, does nothing to convince the world of his good faith pursuit of peace. Netanyahu's election has legitimated all sorts of potential Palestinian tactics and demands--delays, threats of a unilateral declaration of independence, civil disobedience and implicitly, violent rebellion (tactics)--insistence on firm timetables and more international guarantees and involvement (demands)-- which were far less credible when Labor was in power. The Palestinians experienced the negotiations with Labor as a case of pleading, where what they got was due to the noblesse oblige generosity of Israel. It was galling--especially since Israel wasn't especially generous and the Palestinians felt they were demanding justice, not favors. With Likud they now feel they are in negotiations, while indeed still not turning on questions of justice, are determined by power. A more satisfying process, and they think one which will ultimately get them a better deal. It's kind of a watered down Fanonesque phenomenon going on here. They are empowered by battling with Bibi at the Hotel Laromme.

Here is my overview of the basis for the optimistic outlook: Oslo was essentially a conditional Arab surrender. The original dispute in the Arab- Israeli conflict was whether there was going to be a sovereign Jewish State within mandate Palestine. The Arab position was that such a State was illegitimate, shouldn't exist, and they would war to eradicate it or prevent it. The dispute was not over who should possess the Golan

or whether there should also be an Arab-Palestinian State in Palestine. With Oslo, the border Arab States and Palestinians conceded that they would recognize Israel's existence. This is the political victory that eluded Israel in the military victories of 48, 67 and 73. Oslo was a negotiation over the terms of surrender regarding the basic dispute. For Israel's part, it wanted to make sure that the surrender terms were enforceable and enduring, the Arabs wanted to salvage as much as they could of the loses they suffered as a result of not having surrendered earlier (e.g. in 48 when they still had the Golan, some of the Galilee, all of the West Bank, and the old city and east Jerusalem). Peres and Rabin came to understand this, and also understood that if the process wasn't represented as the Palestinian/Arab surrender that it was, Israel would be able to best shape the peace treaty to serve its interests. So Israeli optimism is ultimately based on the belief that Netanyahu turned out not to be so dumb as to throw away this long sought Israeli victory. Palestinian optimism rests on the modest hope that they can move beyond the historical injustice of losing half of Palestine and get on with leading decent lives.

But all this attributes too much rationality to the players. To begin with, there was always a triumphalist streak in Likud ideology and anything less than total victory was seen as defeat. This attitude gained wider currency after the astounding extent of the 67 victory--even giving rise to religious-messianic Blut und Boten Zionism. Bibi and Likud may be too smart to turn down the Arab surrender and hold out for total victory (thereby actually increasing the risk of actual Israeli defeat and certainly inviting continued war), but they may be emotionally and temperamentally unable to carry the process off. The Nixon/China analogy is flawed; Nixon wanted to "open" China--he was looking to sell the policy and felt good about it. Bibi hates Oslo. If he now truly understands it is good for Israel, he still hates that that is what is good for Israel. He hates working with Arafat, complimenting Fatah security work for Israel, downplaying rather than highlighting terrorist incidents. This is a Macho fellow who likes to rattle his sword, a man whose first reaction to two bombs in Tel Aviv last month was to say that if this was the work of any Palestinian there would be hell to pay (it was as obvious as could be that Bibi was exhilarated at the prospect of these being acts of Palestinian terror.) It is as difficult for Bibi to give the Palestinians the feeling of victory and the respect accorded equals as it is for him to actually concede the lands. Maybe more difficult. As a consequence, I suspect that he will engage in rhetoric and petty provocative acts--symbolic settlement activity--to blow things up. There are certainly elements in the Palestinian population that will rise to the bait. Without engaging in too obnoxious ethnic stereotypes, I think I can say that Arab culture is not devoid of the machismo that will require a response to triumphalist rhetoric and symbolic humiliations. Throw in

martyrs seeking Paradise and Masada-inspired fanatics looking to sanctify the Name and you see why I'm not in the optimistic Camp.

Of course, Bibi may do a Rabin evolution. Break their Bones Yitzhak of Blessed Memory, also was a tough guy not given to humanizing visions of the Palestinians. A rational analyst though, he was convinced by Peres to accept the Arab surrender and the reasonable terms its acceptance involved. He didn't relish the peacemaker role and certainly didn't seem too happy about his association with Arafat. But in time he seemed to come around and generate an enthusiasm for peace. The most apt thing about his assassination, is that the right killed him at the moment when his conversion seemed complete. It was at that rally that night that Rabin appeared to emotionally identify with the peace camp, and not simply share their analysis. Now that Bibi has the analysis, maybe he will travel the emotional road Rabin did. But I think not. Rabin was without the Betar romanticization of the Land of Israel, had a military career that left nothing to prove, had friends and associates on the left, was 73 years old and while he liked to be tough, did not thrill to talk tough. That's not our Bibi.

So, there you have it, and probably more of it than you wanted. But its hard not to obsess over this stuff over here. Now I'm going to try and find out if the Pats won last night.

Mitchell