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In Recollection of a Peace-Maker

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In Recollection of a Peace-Maker

Shimon Peres

Abstract

Yitzhak Rabin was a unique man in so many ways. He was introspective and analytical, incisive and sagacious, discerning and decisive. He could be boldly forthright and extraordinarily self-effacing. His intellectual integrity could cut like a scalpel. As a soldier he was a brilliant strategist and as a peace maker he was a visionary. His courage was rock-like. He was a rare leader of Israel and a statesman of world renown. No man understood that better than my predecessor. And since I believe with all my heart that the future peace and stability of our region and, indeed, the construction of a new Middle East, depend in no small measure on the moral and strategic bedrock of that alliance, I congratulate the Fordham International Law Journal in dedicating this issue to one of its foremost architects, Yitzhak Rabin.

INTRODUCTION

IN RECOLLECTION OF A PEACE-MAKER

*Shimon Peres**

Yitzhak Rabin was a unique man in so many ways. He was introspective and analytical, incisive and sagacious, discerning and decisive. He could be boldly forthright and extraordinarily self-effacing. His intellectual integrity could cut like a scalpel. As a soldier he was a brilliant strategist and as a peace maker he was a visionary. His courage was rock-like. He was a rare leader of Israel and a statesman of world renown.

To me, he was like an older brother, a senior partner, a man with whom I could pit my wits, test my thinking, hone my perceptions, and pool my doubts and hopes. Together we shared hours of debate, reflection, decision, and planning. Together we shared days of anxiety and grief, as well as momentous satisfaction and fulfillment.

In many ways we complemented each other as we probed, pressed, and pursued the only objective worthy of the trust bestowed upon us by the people of Israel: to try and build, brick by brick, layer by layer, span by span, a solid and secure bridge across the deep Israeli-Arab divide, across the chasm of prejudice separating us for so long at such horrendous human cost.

The work of construction continues today apace, embedded in a rock of recognition that is now solid, the foundations firmly secured. A new period of historic transition is gradually and inextricably seizing the Middle East — not all of it, but vast reaches of it stretching around our borders.

The peace with Egypt is long-standing. It has withstood many tests. Our governments do not always see eye to eye (how many do?) but the dialogue between Jerusalem and Cairo is intense, continuous, open, and constructive. President Mubarak's role in helping to expand the regional edifice of peace has, at times, been indispensable.

Peace with Jordan, the country with which we share the

* Prime Minister, Israel.

longest frontier, is proving to be extraordinarily beneficial and warm to both sides. King Hussein and I meet periodically and always we have joint projects to talk about and development schemes to share. We are presently engaged in examining the feasibility of transforming the Jordan Rift Valley astriding our common border like an extended, elongated deserted wasteland into a blossoming Tennessee Valley. This is our vision.

Peace with Syria and, by extension Lebanon, the two remaining adversaries on our borders, remains elusive. President Assad declares his readiness to negotiate peace in principle but, thus far, he has abstained from any decision-making encounter with Israel on an appropriately high level, despite the persistent good offices of the United States.

The hurdles are many, not least the festering southern Lebanon where Hizbollah, an arm of Iran and a tool of Damascus, seeks to rain havoc over northern Israel.

We have a mountain of suspicion to negotiate. We have to find genuine solutions to an array of genuine conflicting interests. Yet, I believe, in time, it is doable. And when it is accomplished, when peace with Syria and Lebanon is finally negotiated, as one day it must, it will bring in its wake peace with virtually all of the Arab world and, with that, the end of the Israel-Arab conflict.

Meanwhile, we must complete and vitalize the historic reconciliation with our immediate neighbors, the Palestinians, in keeping with the Oslo Accords. Here, progress has been promising if checkered.

As prescribed by the Oslo Accords, Israeli troops have redeployed out of Palestinian towns and villages in a historic departure. For the first time in their history, the Palestinians have enjoyed a free election and are now governing themselves. This, for us, is a victory of moral commitment; for the Palestinians it is a victory of self-respect.

Nobody forced Israel to take these measures. We are neither weak nor afraid. We acted out of free will as a matter of moral choice. In a territory in which Israel's historic roots extend four thousand years deep we rejected the notion of ruling over another people dwelling in it, even though we possessed the force to do so. We preferred to give up a territorial claim in favor of a higher ethical imperative.

This is what the terrorist tyranny of Islamic fanaticism cannot abide: reconciliation, co-existence, cooperation, live and let live. To dismember the prospect of coexistence, to rip it apart, so-called men of religion have invented a device called the suicide bomber. They sent crazed terrorists to blow themselves up in our midst. Never in history had such a thing happened before where the chosen targets were civilians.

One wonders to what kind of a God these men pay obeisance — a deity who permits a living bomb to blow innocents apart. Is there a religion anywhere which allows, nay commands, suicide so as to slaughter men, women, and children? Can there be an evil more evil than glorifying a gory war against ending wars, which is what Hamas, the Moslem Jihad, and Hizbollah seek to do?

On March 13, 1996, in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt, twenty-nine heads of States and Governments, among them leaders from thirteen Arab countries, met in unison to condemn the scourge of terrorism and to support the peace. The conference, personally initiated within a matter of days by President Bill Clinton, was an unprecedented array and display of collective resolve to fight and defeat terrorism. Never before had Arab leaders joined in such numbers and such authority in condemning terrorism against Israel and committing themselves to principles of cooperation to eradicate it. Here, if anything, was evidence of the benefits of the peace process. A year ago, even six months ago, such a sight would have been unthinkable.

Practical work is beginning to emerge out of the Sharm el Sheikh Conference leading, hopefully, to the creation of an enduring coalition to respond to the moral call and to answer the practical needs through international cooperation. Terrorism knows no borders; so borders must not restrain action to crush the terrorist snake.

As I said at the Conference, the terrorism we have experienced is not anonymous. It has a name. It has an address. It has a bank account. It has an infrastructure. It has networks camouflaged as charity organizations. It is estimated that Hamas receives payment from abroad to the tune of seven hundred to eight hundred million dollars annually. This work is spearheaded by a country — Iran. The Iranian people are not our enemy. Religion is not our foe. It is the regime which initi-

ates, promotes, and exports violence and fanaticism. As the United States has long determined, Teheran has become the capital of terror. We must not allow Teheran and its terrorist agencies to impose their doctrines and dictate the regional agenda.

Which is why we demand of the Palestinians, with who we wish to complete our historic reconciliation, the unequivocal fulfillment of the Oslo Accords — nothing more. We do not ask the Palestinian Authority to defend our lives. Our defense is our own sole responsibility. But the Palestinians must fulfill the obligations of an elected authority. They must fight with all their might to prevent the terror from infecting their body politic. They cannot prosper with murderous command centers in their midst. No legal peace can tolerate illegal guns pointed at it. More than it is a threat to Israel, Palestinian terror is a threat to the Palestinian Authority itself.

In a sense, the post-Cold War World we are facing — the world ever more countries are facing — is shifting from one of confrontation with long-standing recognizable enemies arrayed along defined frontiers and in command of defined territories and armies to a confrontation with dangers and threats that are more hidden and amorphous. One such danger is the fundamentalist fanaticism. It knows no frontiers and its terrorist methods threaten peace and stability in many corners of the World. Their present immediate threat is an amalgam of suicide bombs and modern weaponry. But this can escalate. Fundamentalism with a nuclear bomb has to be the nightmare of our age.

In the case of Israel, the reason for the latest savage terror is precisely because the peace-making effort is bearing fruit. Many barriers which separated Israel from its neighbors are gone. Israel now has relations of one sort or another with seven Arab states and is in liaison with more. Yesterday's enemies are today's partners. The hunting grounds of cynics and skeptics are diminishing.

All this would hardly have been attainable were it not for the end of the Cold War. It probably could not have happened at all without the resoluteness of the United States in pursuing and defending the stability of the region, by force when necessary. Certainly, there never could have been a hope for peace were Israel not strong enough to take risks to make it happen.

And an element — a crucial element — of that strength lies in the unique alliance of values and interests that has long prevailed between the mighty United States and my own small country. Never have we asked U.S. sons and daughters to fight instead of ours. We never shall. But thanks to the support the United States has given and the aid it has rendered, we have been able to overcome wars and tragedies thrust upon us and feel sufficiently strong to take the measured risks to wage our campaign of peace.

No man understood that better than my predecessor. And since I believe with all my heart that the future peace and stability of our region and, indeed, the construction of a new Middle East, depend in no small measure on the moral and strategic bedrock of that alliance, I congratulate the *Fordham International Law Journal* in dedicating this issue to one of its foremost architects, Yitzhak Rabin.