Oslo, the Bomb, and Other Home Remedies

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At first glance, no two foreign policy initiatives undertaken by the State of Israel since its founding seem as dissimilar as the nuclear weapons program of the 1950s and 1960s, and the Oslo accords of the 1990s. Yet not far beneath the surface of both initiatives one finds a common intellectual genealogy, a striking similarity in fundamental assumptions and aspirations without which it is doubtful that either project would ever have taken wing. And this is no surprise, given that both projects were to a large extent the brainchild of Israel's singular strategic wizard, former Prime Minister Shimon Peres. Indeed, despite his celebrated transformation from one of the Jewish state's most militant hawks to the arch-guru of its peace camp, Shimon Peres has nevertheless, in a career spanning five decades, retained a consistent philosophical outlook and an unchanging intellectual style which is probably without parallel in the imprint it has left on the country's foreign policy.

In his literary capstone to the Oslo accords, *The New Middle East*, Peres himself takes note of the similarity between the two crowning achievements of his political career. By Peres' own account, both the nuclear weapons project, which he supervised as director-general of the Defense Ministry from 1953 to 1959, and the 1993 Oslo agreement with Yasser Arafat's PLO,

reflected his sense for "when to ignore history," as well as his passion for the "element of surprise" in putting forth dramatic political initiatives. "More than thirty years have elapsed between the completion of the Dimona [nuclear weapons] project and my second—even more crucial—opportunity to contribute to the welfare of Israel.... The situation was similar: Only a few people could see the potential for peace."[1] Yet a look at the scores of interviews he granted and articles he wrote over the past fifty years reveals that the Dimona and Oslo projects had much more in common than perhaps even Peres himself might like to admit.

Already at the outset of Peres' career in Israeli public service in the first years of independence, the young protégé of Prime Minister and Defense Minister David Ben-Gurion became known for his unorthodox articulation of the challenges Israel faced in its struggle for survival, and in his formulation of the aims of its foreign policy.[2] As the thirty-year-old director-general of the Defense Ministry, Peres cut his political teeth in an environment which was saturated with high-blown ideology. Most of the nation's political movements and leaders—from Labor movement stalwarts Yigal Allon and Meir Ya'ari, to Herut's Menahem Begin—framed their causes and their attendant political campaigns in stridently ideological terms, with relatively little effort expended on pragmatic or historically grounded analyses which could illuminate the turbulent relationship between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East. Within this context, Peres first made his name as an innovator eager to depart from the dogma-driven conventional wisdoms of the new state's efforts to solve its security problems—a quality that would serve him well throughout his career.

In one of his first articles on Israeli security, published in 1954, Peres enumerated the main principles of his security doctrine—principles which were strongly reminiscent of the views of Ben-Gurion, Peres' mentor and the source of his political strength throughout that period. These ideas, which guided the Israeli security community as well as Peres' own thinking until after the 1956 Sinai campaign, included balancing investment in immediate security concerns against the construction of a long-term defense

infrastructure; building up the army's deterrent posture and the unity of purpose of the reservists on which this deterrence depended; and maintaining a balance between classic military approaches to security as against those based on the Zionist principle of Jewish settlement in vulnerable border areas. In fact, in the early stages of his career, Peres saw Jewish settlement as being a kind of unique, Zionist secret weapon with a very special role to play in eliminating future wars. For him, Jewish settlement was "an essential factor in times of danger, and not because the battle will be focused on border settlements.... Rather, it is because Jewish settlement diminishes the Arabs' desire for war...."[3]

Central to Peres' foreign policy conception was the belief that such a combination of realistic and positive steps in the realm of defense policy could suffice in bringing security. In this view, little was to be gained by projecting an image of a Jewish state which was too anxious for peace. "Declarations by us of our desire for peace are not received by them [i.e., the Arabs] as being righteous ... but rather as a sign of weakness." Moreover, the "overuse of diplomacy [invites] increasing intervention by foreign powers in the internal matters of the State of Israel."[4] For the young Peres, the question of securing Israel's borders had to be totally divorced from the "high policy" of the negotiators and diplomats.

Today, revisionist historians like to portray Ben-Gurion's distaste for negotiations with the Arabs as essentially aggressive, and the result of a lack of peaceful intentions. But when one takes into account the fact that Egypt was, for most of this period, demanding as a condition for peace the Israeli cession of much of the Negev (the southern half of pre-1967 Israel), while Syria laid a similar claim to half the Sea of Galilee in addition to other territorial demands in the north of the country, one does not have to strain too hard to understand Ben-Gurion's reluctance to engage in negotiations. As Peres never seemed to tire of explaining, secure borders would not, for Israel, be a subject for discussion. Peace would be ensured by the army's deterrent posture, whereas international diplomatic intervention would only drag Israel into negotiations whose negative outcome was assured: "Israel

cannot, therefore, be active in the fundamental direction it desires—the direction of peace—because the current call for peace is intended more to please the Arabs than to take into account the needs of peace. And the call for peace does not include, for example, free passage in Eilat, but rather suggests 'study' of the 'sentimental' borders [i.e., the Negev, which U.S. Secretary of State Dulles had defined as only having sentimental value] of the State of Israel. Thus we have come to the absurd situation in which the spirit of compromise strengthens the will of the side that seeks war, and presents Israel with peace proposals similar to the conditions presented to the vanquished side in a war." Instead, Peres saw strategic self-reliance as the only solution: "Dependence on our own strength was and remains our only realistic security policy."[5]

It was not too long before Peres began to move away from his belief that Jewish settlement could serve as an essential tool for dispelling the Arabs' military aspirations. Yet the goal of somehow managing to eliminate the Arabs' "desire for war" would remain the constant focus of all of his efforts. When the Arab regimes continued to give voice to a "desire for war," despite the successful solidification of Israel's border towns and the organization of an increasingly well-prepared military, Peres' analysis shifted accordingly. By the mid-1950s he came to believe, as did Ben-Gurion, that the "next round"—as it was called then—simply could not be prevented, and Israel therefore had no choice but to prepare for it. Indeed, over the course of the two years subsequent to the article in which he expressed confidence in the value of Jewish settlement for robbing the Arabs of their belief that Israel could be uprooted militarily, he gradually drew the logical conclusions of the belief in an inevitable "next round": Peres became one of the leading advocates of preemptive, initiated conflict, whose purpose was to allow Israel, rather than its enemies, to determine the time and place of battle, and thereby achieve a victory so decisive that it could eliminate the Arabs' desire to engage in future rounds.[6]

This approach reached its height in Peres' assessment of the Sinai campaign of October 1956, in which Israel, together with Britain and France, initiated a preemptive military engagement against Egypt, which resulted in the rout of the largest of the Arab armies. Among the achievements of the Sinai campaign, Peres lists the strategic alliance developed as a result of the French decision to undertake joint operations between its forces and Israel's—a major component of which was military aid to the Jewish state, proffered out of a belief that it advanced French interests, and therefore without diplomatic strings attached.[7] The jewel in the crown was what Shlomo Aharonson dubbed the "royal gift": The supply of essential technologies for the development of Israel's nuclear program. During the year prior to the Sinai campaign, the nuclear project had received a shot in the arm with the return of its great supporter, Ben-Gurion as prime minister and defense minister after a fifteen-month absence.[8] Peres, who played a pivotal role in the French nuclear connection, hinted publicly as early as April 1957, just after the withdrawal from Sinai, at the importance of the developing relationship with Paris: "The French weaponry helped us win the day on the battlefield. That, however, was just the beginning. After the Czech deal [with the Arabs] we ran all over the world pursuing *quality materiel....* The French were the only ones who decided to be friends in time of trouble.... Friends that gave us what we needed, that which we thought was needed."[9]

But despite these successes which resulted from the projection of Israeli military power, the Sinai campaign was ruinous for Peres' beliefs about the utility of an Israeli preemptive strike in quelling Arab belligerence. The lesson that Ben-Gurion and Peres learned from the conflict was that conventional military might and preemptive strikes were severely limited in their ability to deter war. Instead of taking their quick defeat in the Sinai to heart, the Arabs, it seemed, only took it as a signal that they needed to work all the harder to increase their weapons stockpiles, shoring up their strength for yet another "next round." The next round had come and gone, and it would do so repeatedly, unceasingly. Peres, who had believed in the

possibility that conventional might and preemptive war could achieve a "knockout"—that is, a one-time and absolute rejoinder to Israel's security problem—was also one of the first to realize that nothing was to be gained from additional rounds, even victorious ones such as the Sinai campaign, since they would never bring an end to the cycle of conflict. From this perspective, the Sinai campaign as well as the Six Day War were, as Raymond Aron put it in late 1967, nothing but successful incursions beyond the borders of the camp.

Towards the end of the 1950s, Peres came to believe in a new solution, a radically different means of effecting a "knockout": Nuclear armaments. In this sense, the Israeli nuclear program became for Peres a race against the clock to prevent the successive rounds of war which would otherwise inevitably recur. This was the period during which Peres forged his famous slogan that nuclear arms in the superpower arena are less dangerous than conventional bombs in the Middle East, because regular bombs explode while atomic bombs are designed to prevent wars.[10] Indeed, by 1959, and apparently as a result of the Sinai campaign, Peres was already prepared to declare that "if, for example, there were a choice between expanding the country's geographic borders and broadening its scientific and industrial horizons, I myself this very minute would be counted among those choosing the latter—from a security perspective as well."[11] Thus the entire range of geopolitical and military solutions, from Jewish settlements to preemptive strikes to punitive seizure of territory, were by now found wanting in comparison to the new panacea: "Broadening Israel's scientific horizons." Certainly, one may attribute this shift in part to an attempt to rationalize the Israeli withdrawal from Sinai after the war, which had been forced upon it by the United States—saying, in effect, that Israel did not really need the territory anyway. But it is also true that Peres grasped at a fairly early stage that the military component of Israeli power was limited and one-dimensional, and that this recognition also marked the beginning of a new strategic outlook for Peres, one in which Israel would resign itself to its present borders.[12]

When reading Peres' articles from the early 1960s, one cannot help but notice the sense of urgency with which they were written. Even without uttering the "ineffable name" of nuclear weapons,[13] it is clear that Peres considered the nuclear option a means to create strategic depth and replace preemptive war. Peres realized that the victory in Sinai had tremendously strengthened the school of thought within the military that supported initiated ground war as the most potent prophylactic to Arab threats (especially those emanating from Egypt). Having no military background himself, Peres was to a large extent an outsider to the generals building up Israel's young armed forces, and it is this which one detects in his almost frenzied efforts to persuade his readers that the entire doctrine was, as a means of keeping the peace, futile.[14] The result was that, ironically, the Peres-led race to obtain an Israeli nuclear option was conducted not only against the Egyptians, but also against the Israeli army's top brass, who he knew would respond to the "next round" as they had responded to the last—with a doctrine advocating a massive preemptive strike that made war inevitable.

There can be little question, therefore, that it was during this period, after 1959, that Peres decisively parted company with the rest of the Israeli security community, believing that Israel must attain its strategic depth not in territory or settlement but in a different dimension—the technological "third dimension," as he would later call it.[15] His preference for scientific investment over political borders almost immediately translated into a downgrading of the importance of terrain, which ceased to be a factor the moment one lost the belief in the paramountcy of ground-based might.[16] This dispute over security theory bred a wide political rift, with Peres and Ben-Gurion, believers in technology, facing off against the headstrong stance of the general staff, which continued to hold firm in its belief in territory—at whose vanguard stood Yitzhak Rabin, who in 1964 assumed the position of Chief of General Staff.

In fact, the race to secure an Israeli nuclear option was only one aspect of a larger vision of technological progress and prowess that Peres enter-

tained for the Jewish state. An article he wrote in early 1966 offered a summary of his approach. Although at the time the attention of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and the Israeli public was riveted on the conflict with the Syrians over the headwaters of the Jordan River, and on the steady increase in terrorist activity in the north, Peres kept his geopolitical gaze focused on Egypt, which in his view held the key to all developments in the Middle East. "The precondition for mutual concessions is in the process of development, though this process has not yet come to fruition: Arab despair of ever being able to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict by force of their military superiority." In other words, Peres believed that the shattering of the impulse for war was the solution, and that it would occur via technological breakthroughs: "Just now, the president of Egypt, Abdel Nasser, declared that he will launch a preventive war against us if he becomes convinced that his suspicion of us—nuclear capability—is justified." Peres hurled his own threats in return but also presented the following analysis: "[Nasser] should take into account that [the war's] conclusion is liable to be such that it does not at all justify its undertaking. A preventive war that is prevented is the best of wars, for him and for us."[17]

The crisis on the eve of the Six Day War should have been the test of the nuclear deterrence policy of Peres and Ben-Gurion. But as it turned out, both of them had left the Labor party in 1965 and were ensconced in opposition when the crisis hit—unable to play any of the hard-won cards which were supposed to have prevented the war. In the race of the nuclear strategist to prevent the "next round" and preemptive war, the nuclear school lost. In the outbreak of the war one could discern, to a certain extent, the collapse of the Peres security doctrine as it had developed since the Sinai campaign. Yuval Ne'eman, who had headed the nuclear research project at Nahal Sorek in the early 1960s and went on to lead the conservative Tehiya party, writes that "on the eve of the Six Day War, Israel had an extensive nuclear infrastructure, with all the security potential implied therein,"[18] and yet the six years that followed the May crisis of 1967 were the bloodiest since the War of Independence. The Six Day War in June 1967, the War of Attrition which

continued until 1970, and the 1973 Yom Kippur War can, against this back-drop, be seen as a substantial Arab success, in that Egypt managed to trap Israel into fighting a series of bruising conventional ground wars without ever being able to make any use of its massive technological advantage—whose entire purpose had been to obviate the need for endless military sparring.

After the 1967 victory, most of Israel's political spectrum saw the newly acquired territories—Sinai and Gaza, Judea and Samaria, and the Golan Heights—as decisive bargaining chips in future negotiations with the Arabs. Sinai alone was three times the size of Israel before the Six Day War, and for the first time the possibility of cashing in all or most of its chips for a diplomatically negotiated "peace" became the focus of Israel's foreign poli-cy—and the yardstick for measuring the actions of every Israeli government. Whereas prior to 1967, the state's energies were overwhelmingly devoted to development and survival (with all in agreement that Israel had little choice but to wait, as Peres had suggested, for the Arabs to despair), since 1967 Is-raeli politics has been characterized by a sense of unlimited ability to tempt the Arabs out of the cycle of war—as if a safe and tranquil life, the nation's most cherished dream, had suddenly moved within reach. It was only after 1967, when Israel acquired what was almost universally perceived to be an exceptionally strong bargaining position, that Peres ceased to be a lonely voice in the wilderness believing in the possibility of an absolute end to the Arab-Israeli conflict, as he had been until then. Ironically, it was the very same war in which Peres' decade-long belief in the nuclear panacea was oblit-erated, that he suddenly found himself face to face with another, far more popular, strategy for achieving the termination of the Arabs' "desire for war": The goal that he established for Israeli foreign policy already in the first year after the war was full peace, with the territories as leverage in negotiation. Peres' greatest foreign policy worry at the time was that Israel would with-draw under political pressure, from without or within, rather than in ex-change for a permanent settlement.[19]

The Peres of the 1960s and 1970s, holding fast to the Ben-Gurionist approach of tiring out the Arabs by one means or another of creating

massive Israeli power—whether with settlements, nuclear weapons or cap-tured territory held hostage—was easily recognized as a member of the Is-raeli political "right" of those days—so much so, that some Labor leaders did not wince at calling Peres a "fascist."[20] Later, during the negotiations with Egypt, Peres took a stance more uncompromising than that of Likud leader Menahem Begin. He considered Begin's acknowledgment at Camp David of the "legitimate rights of the Palestinian people" a grave error. He did advocate territorial compromise with the Jordanians, but his anti-PLO position was similar to Begin's; although Peres was more polite than Begin, who viewed some of the PLO's constituent groups as "Arab Nazis,"[21] he nevertheless agreed with Begin in seeing the PLO as the primary enemy obstructing the attainment of peace on the eastern front.[22] "The Arab de-cision and position distanced Jordan, at least at this stage, from being able to be a negotiating partner," lamented Peres in 1974. "They thwarted the Egyptian attempt to break away from the military path ... towards diplo-matic negotiations."[23] Peres considered the PLO an extremist power center in the Arab world, and saw it for many years thereafter as a primary stum-bling block to an agreement. But in the distorted political lexicon taking shape in Israel at that time, the "territorial compromise" that Peres sug-gested, a reasonable stance for anyone who did not believe in strategic value of land, made him appear to the "left" of Begin even when his views were still exceptionally hard-line.

After Ben-Gurion was effectively eliminated from Israel's leadership in 1967, Peres remained as a nominal centrist in a political camp that was drifting increasingly to the left. The Labor party's vanishing "Ben-Gurionist" wing, Begin's accession to power, and the short-lived centrist Democratic Movement for Change party all served to emphasize the shift of the Labor bloc away from the country's natural political "center."

But the drift to the left was not merely a political optical illusion. It was a very real phenomenon, resulting in part from the fact that Labor was

increasingly coming under the influence of intellectuals such as Amos Oz, S. Yizhar, and others who—unlike the old-line Labor leadership—believed in the struggle of the Palestinian Arabs for national liberation and their right to self-determination as political ends in themselves. Gradually, the view that a "just" solution to the Palestinian problem must be a central goal of Israeli policy gained precedence over the traditional Labor position that Israel had a right to receive a permanent peace in exchange for some or all of the territories acquired in 1967.

Peres' view, on the other hand, remained one focused not on "justice" for the Palestinians, but rather on Israel's long-term security. Thus it was that when he took over the leadership of the Labor party after Yitzhak Rabin resigned as prime minister in 1977, Peres found himself the de jure leader of a genuine left that was becoming increasingly extreme, even as he himself was struggling to gain legitimacy within the party despite his well-known position as a hawk. Equipped with neither the historical halo that had always been a source of power for Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir, nor the prestige of victorious generals such as Yigal Allon and Yitzhak Rabin, Peres had to base his political strength on the consent and support of his constituency. He therefore faced the unenviable choice of either recanting his beliefs in favor of those of Oz and Yizhar, or paying for his principles with his political life.

Peres chose neither. Instead, he responded to the exigencies of the moment by effecting an ideological transformation which left him with a new outlook that was at once far more palatable to the new Labor party, while at the same time remaining entirely true to his fundamental outlook. Where the powerful, futuristic dream of melting down the Arabs' "desire for war" by settlement or nuclear weapons had failed, a new futuristic dream began to take shape—one in which a regionalized economy, mutual dependence and "soft borders" between Israel and the Arab states would have precisely the same effect. Through a breathtaking combination of inexorable political necessity and Peres' lifelong search for the "knockout" nostrum for Israel's chronic vulnerability, the "new Middle East" was born.

A significant turning point in the development of Peres' relations with the peace camp occurred in the stormy days of the Lebanon war. At the outset of the war, Peres had come out strongly in support of the actions of the government led by Begin and Ariel Sharon in Lebanon. Any criticism he voiced at the time was of a technical nature; on the substance of the issue he was still a disciple of David Ben-Gurion. Indeed, as late as July 1982, Peres wrote in support of the overall strategy of eliminating the PLO as a force in the political arena: "Our argument with the PLO is not about the past, but rather about the future. I do not foresee any substantive Israeli mandate being given to anyone in its name, to [accept the PLO's demands of returning to] the pre-1967 borders, to divide Jerusalem and to establish a Palestinian state that will attempt now to overthrow Israel, now to take over Jordan." Thus, the Peres of 1982 endorsed Ariel Sharon's view that PLO forces must be swept out of Beirut, and he lauded the IDF's successes: "The IDF accomplished its immediate mission: to release northern Israel from the threat of PLO terror."[24]

Yet only a few weeks later, Peres spoke at a massive Peace Now demonstration following the massacre of Palestinians by Lebanese Christians allied with Israel at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut. This scene epitomized the dynamic in Peres' relations with the left and the creeping rapprochement which was taking place between the leader and his camp. That night, this long-time scourge of the PLO recognized that he had no choice but to stand up and speak before an unprecedented crowd of protesters, already sown with the seeds of pro-Palestinian sentiment—or else face being swept aside. And speak he did, creating, by his very presence, the first political bridge between the radicalism of Peace Now and the Labor party. Nor could there be any mistaking what had taken place, as *Ha'aretz* writer Avi Valentine wrote at the time: "If for the Labor party this was a step forward, then for Peace Now it was a watershed, and those at the head of the movement emphasize this repeatedly. For the first time, the Labor party and Peace Now stood together as equals." When asked by Valentine whether they were apprehensive about being swallowed up by the Labor party, two Peace Now

leaders, Avshalom Vilen and Tsali Reshef, responded with unequivocal confidence. "Vilen: 'The Labor bloc has a problem, not us. Labor came to a dovish demonstration. It moves within our forces.' Reshef: 'Labor learned this evening that there is a large constituency in the streets awaiting a dovish leadership—and this is the antithesis of the Likud…. In the future Labor will have to take us into account as a political force in every move it makes.'"[25]

And, in fact, Peres learned the same lesson that Peace Now did, and did begin taking it into account. For the first time he recognized that the foreign policy of the peace camp ("total justice" for Palestinian Arabs achieved through the establishment of a Palestinian state), even if not meritorious in and of itself, nevertheless did not really contradict his own concerns over finding a way to overcome the Arabs' "desire for war." A stunning example of the change in Peres' strategy can be found in his new attachment to left-wing intellectuals, particularly Amos Oz. In the early 1960s, Oz had left the Labor party along with a number of other academic and cultural figures in the wake of a public scandal known as the Lavon affair, which had centered on Ben-Gurion's allegedly immoral and authoritarian policies in operating Israel's defense establishment; Peres, then a leading figure in implementing Ben-Gurion's defense policies, was at the very center of the campaign of vilification conducted by Oz and his group. After the Six Day War, Oz had gone on to become a leading advocate of the view that justice required that the Palestinian Arabs be granted a state alongside Israel, more or less regardless of whether such a state would constitute a permanent danger.

Naturally, the Shimon Peres of the 1970s was unprepared to associate himself with such views. But the situation changed gradually, and he and Oz developed a friendship which carried with it an important political component. Already in 1981, when Begin first stood for reelection, Oz was mobilized in support for Peres, appearing in a televised campaign ad which featured the moralist-guru of Israeli literature sitting under a tree, chewing on a reed, his hair blowing in the wind. In later years, the two grew even closer; by the early 1990s, Peres went as far as declaring that Oz should be the one to replace him in the party leadership, and that he saw in Oz a

candidate for prime minister.[26] Their intimate political relationship played a role even in the secret negotiations leading up to the Oslo agreements. "One day my friend, author Amos Oz, called me," wrote Peres in *The New Middle East.* "'Shimon,' he asked, 'did you ever think about what would happen should the PLO cave in completely?'"[27] Peres did think about it, and came to the conclusion that the elimination of the PLO would only augur the creation of even more vicious Palestinian groups—hence the Oslo accords, which scrapped Peres' long-standing desire for an accommodation with the Jordanians in favor of Oz's preferred solution.

R eading *The New Middle East*, one gets the impression that even as he was adopting the agenda of those Israeli political elements most sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, Peres never adopted their *beliefs*, seeing the entire Oslo process only as an important step in the direction of his larger regional vision—a "Golden Age in the Middle East" ushered in by technological progress and economic development. That is, the tilt to the PLO remained, for Peres, not really a matter of justice for the Palestinians, but rather only a means towards accomplishing the long-cherished goal of bringing all of the Arab world to abandon its desire to wage war against Israel. Seen from this perspective, Oslo emerges as only the latest incarnation of Peres' steadfast belief in a sweeping, technologically driven solution to Israel's existential dilemmas. Drawing upon the European model, Peres calls for the creation of a "regional system" to replace the national one in matters of trade, tourism, water, sharing of technology and, later, security.[28] This "knockout" blow to the Arab war-urge remains Peres' real goal, for which Oslo was but a steppingstone.

For Peres, the acceptance of the PLO (as well as other positions adopted from Israel's far-left) is essentially a tactical concession. For years, and even after the beginning of his strategic political alliance with Peace Now, Peres continued to see the Palestinians as a key enemy and the PLO as a factor that must be eliminated. In October 1985, as prime minister he sent

the air force on a long-range bombing mission to Tunis to destroy PLO headquarters, in an effort to deal it a death blow. Peres' readiness to begin the Oslo process, and thereby to prepare the groundwork for a Palestinian state, was never more than a means, a temporary stage before the realization of his final objective. Recognition of the PLO was of marginal importance compared with his larger vision for the entire region—for where borders are soft and economic ties have rendered war irrelevant, what difference does it really make which Arab states are where? While he may have given in on much in the way of long-standing political positions in order to win the support of people such as Amos Oz, Yossi Sarid and the editors of *Ha'aretz*, it was all to be chalked up to tactics in the service of a greater strategy.

But Peres' choice was, of course, not ultimately about tactics. Because once set in motion, the alignment with the left took on a life of its own, tearing asunder many basic principles that Peres preached with all his might for most of his career. Peres, with his own hands, created the mechanism that led to "forced withdrawal under pressure without a permanent settlement," the very thing he had so feared after the Six Day War.[29] Although he once saw Israel's secure borders as not being a legitimate subject for negotiations, he now wrote in *The New Middle East* that precisely the opposite was the case: "We need soft borders, not rigid, impermeable ones."[30] And where he once expressed fear over the fact that over-reliance on diplomacy and negotiations could bring about intervention in Israel's internal matters, Peres now conceded—both to the U.S. of today and to a "Middle Eastern Union" of tomorrow—everything short of veto power over Israel's security considerations, even in matters pertaining to areas just a few miles from its population centers.

Yet the more worrisome phenomenon with Peres and the intellectual-political circle around him is not the softness of the borders, but rather the softness of their diplomatic and strategic posture, a softness *so* soft that it has become indistinguishable from complete inconsistency. For example, when *The New Middle East* was published several months after Oslo, in late 1993, Peres was still adamant in his rejection of a Palestinian state:

> In Israeli eyes, the map of their country looks like an anorexic body: Tall
> and narrow-hipped. Narrow hips can be broken by a sudden, well-organized
> attack. So Israel's opposition to the establishment of a Palestinian state is
> a direct result of this fear. Even if the Palestinians agree that their state
> would have no army or weapons, who can guarantee that a Palestinian
> army could not be mustered later to encamp at the gates of Jerusalem and
> the approaches to the lowlands? And if the Palestinian state would be un-
> armed, how would it block terrorist attacks perpetrated by extremists, fun-
> damentalists or irredentists?[31]

Since Peres wrote these words, the Palestinian army which he feared has
come into being already, even without the advent of a Palestinian state.[32]
Meanwhile, suicide bombings emerged as one of the factors in the demise of
his Labor government. In response, Peres guided his ideological ship on a
new course headed for the same port, sacrificing yet again a once-crucial po-
sition which now appeared to stand in his way: Peres has come to agree that
there is no possibility of reaching a permanent settlement that does not re-
sult in a Palestinian state. Thus, while declaring that he sees the Palestini-
an state as a danger to the existence of Israel, he creates the very mechanism
that brings about its establishment, and, at the same time—and no less im-
portant—the psycho-ideological mechanism that paves the way for recon-
ciliation with the event. When political beliefs so significant as the question
of Palestinian sovereignty adjacent to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv are so readily
adopted or discarded, one begins to wonder about Peres and his more
extreme constituents: Who really used whom as a means to achieve their
ultimate political goals?

Peres' primary security rationale for the Oslo agreements is the danger
of missiles and nuclear weapons in the Middle East. Again, as in the years
before the Six Day War, Peres finds himself in a frantic race against the
clock. Oslo, from his perspective, is an attempt to push the entire region
onto a "peace" track before militant nations such as Iran and Iraq become
nuclear powers. As for Israel's might, Peres now sees it in terms of economic
globalization: Partnerships, joint business ventures, a common market

and so forth. In other words, a vision based on the belief that business and economic progress will solve all problems and eliminate the need for nationalism—once again, a belief in the absolute power of technological progress, vintage 1960s.

Peres' understanding that missiles and nuclear weapons are Israel's gravest security concern may be correct. But just as the Dimona initiative did not in its day bring the "knockout" blow to Israel's security problems, so too did the Oslo project fail to bring in the much-promised peace. Perhaps the lesson of Peres' career is that in order to lessen the likelihood of war—an aim for which Peres, as a devoted public servant of the State of Israel, has striven for so long—what is needed is to reject his basic guiding principle: The very idea of an absolute and comprehensive solution. Is there really an identifiable finish line, towards which one can race at full speed so as to finally "win," once and for all? Or is there instead a dynamic reality which may never be too pleasant to look at, and which demands of us flexibility and a constant, patient grappling with the issues as they arise? A vision, every vision, is tested by its ability to serve reality—and not only by its simplicity and charm.

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Notes

1. Shimon Peres, *The New Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), pp. 3-5.

2. See, for example, Shimon Peres, "Protecting Our Security," in *Niv Hakvutza* (June 1954), p. 413.

3. Shimon Peres, *The Next Step* (Tel Aviv: Am Hasefer, 1965), p. 15. [Hebrew]

4. Peres, *The Next Step*, p. 11.

5. Peres, *The Next Step*, p. 19.

6. The question that demands to be asked here, against the background of preparation for the next round, is whether or not there might have been, in the years before the Sinai campaign, the opportunity for Israel to enter a process of trading concessions for a peace agreement. Since the publication of former Prime Minister Moshe Sharett's diaries and the research conducted in recent years by Itamar Rabinovich, Ilan Assia, Murla Baron and others, it is now clear that such an option existed. However, the price demanded from Israel for peace agreements with Egypt and Syria was too high in the opinion of Ben-Gurion, and thus he wisely avoided entering into a negotiation process. Furthermore, when Sharett undertook peace initiatives that could lead to negotiations, Ben-Gurion torpedoed them via aggressive military actions, such as the Gaza and Sea of Galilee operations in 1955.

7. Peres, *The Next Step*, p. 40.

8. See Yuval Ne'eman, "Israel in the Nuclear Era," in *Nativ* (May 1995), p. 37.

9. Peres, *The Next Step*, p. 40. Emphasis in original.

10. Peres, *The Next Step*, p. 65.

11. *Ha'aretz*, August 28, 1959.

12. The Sinai campaign offered two justifications for such a position: First, that the mass flight of Arabs from conquered areas that occurred in 1948 did not repeat itself in the Sinai campaign; second, that the major powers acted decisively to prevent territorial adjustments, and would likely do so again in the future.

13. To this day, Israel officially does not admit to possessing nuclear weapons, speaking instead in euphemisms; even as Peres was writing in 1993 about his involvement in the nuclear weapons project of the 1960s, he wrote only of a "nuclear generator built in ... the city of Dimona"—a nuclear plant which somehow could bring about a "Middle East without war." Peres, *The New Middle East*, p. 4. In the

index of that book, an entry entitled "nuclear weapons, Israel's program of" refers the reader to the discussion of the Dimona plant on pp. 4-5.

14. As is known, the intelligence community did not foresee the impending war. Peres was the only one who read the map correctly and saw that the maturation of the nuclear option was becoming a *casus belli* from the point of view of Egypt, and that war was therefore likely to erupt in the near future.

15. *Ha'aretz*, August 28, 1959.

16. It was thus no coincidence that Yigal Allon, the architect of the famous "Allon plan" for partial annexation of the territories of the West Bank, was the leading supporter of the preventive war theory. He viewed the Jordan Valley and the eastern slopes of the Samarian mountain range as a natural goal to be pursued by Israel, a territorial ambition for adjusting the eastern border. See Zaki Shalom, *David Ben-Gurion, the State of Israel and the Arab World 1949-1956* (S'deh Boker: Ben-Gurion Heritage Center, 1995), p. 221. [Hebrew]

17. *Ha'aretz*, February 25, 1966.

18. Ne'eman, "Israel in the Nuclear Era," p. 38.

19. *Ha'aretz*, April 26, 1968. It seems that, in effect, the Israeli public did not grasp that the very situation it considered a victory, elimination of the threat of Arab siege, in objective military and diplomatic terms was no victory at all. There was no Arab surrender and no peace agreement following the end of the fighting. In other words, the supposed card that would give Israel the winning hand, the territories, turned out not to be as decisive as was imagined.

20. See for example Michael Ben Zohar, *Ben-Gurion* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1980), p. 548. [Hebrew]

21. Menahem Begin, "Realistic Fundamentals for National Policy," in *Ha'uma* (December 1974), p. 5.

22. He came out with this position when the PLO became a dominant factor in Arab politics, in 1974, following the UN resolution regarding the PLO and Yasser Arafat's appearance before the General Assembly.

23. *Ha'aretz*, December 6, 1974.

24. *Ha'aretz*, July 30, 1982.

25. *Ha'aretz* Supplement, October 1, 1982.

26. *Ha'ir*, November 24, 1995; *Tzomet Hasharon*, November 24, 1995.

27. Peres, *The New Middle East*, p. 18.

28. Peres, *The New Middle East*, pp. 61-86.

29. *Ha'aretz*, April 26, 1968.

30. Peres, *The New Middle East*, p. 171.

31. Peres, *The New Middle East*, pp. 168-169.

32. *Ha'aretz*, December 8, 1967.