

Opinion

"The Sea Is the Same Sea," Shamir Said. History Proved Exactly the Opposite



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In 1989, in response to the Palestinians' recognition in 1988 of UN Resolutions 181 and 242, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir articulated a political outlook that has since become widespread across large sections of the Israeli right: "They once spoke of throwing us into the sea. Today they no longer say that. They have become more sophisticated - [they demand, S.A.] self-determination for the Palestinians... But if we truly look at reality, it has not changed. The Arabs are the same Arabs... and the sea is the same sea. The objective remains the same objective - the destruction of the State of Israel." Beyond its blunt wording, this is a concise expression of a worldview according to which the conflict is not a political dispute that can be resolved through compromises and agreements, but an existential struggle in which the Arab side has changed only its tactics, not its objective. According to this outlook, every diplomatic initiative, every agreement and every willingness to recognize one another are merely a smokescreen. They reflect no genuine change in positions, but rather an attempt to achieve through political means what could not be achieved through military means.

This is not merely a historical statement by a single leader. For decades, this approach prevailed among opponents of political settlements with the Arab world, particularly settlements involving withdrawal from territories occupied in 1967. Opponents of diplomatic processes argued that the conflict is unaffected by Israel's policies

and its actions in practice. Whether Israel holds on to territories, withdraws from them or proposes a territorial compromise is immaterial. According to this outlook, the conflict stems from opposition to the very existence of the State of Israel and will continue until its destruction. If this is the underlying assumption, every compromise is perceived as an existential risk.

This approach has accompanied almost every major diplomatic turning point since the 1970s. When the peace treaty with Egypt was signed in 1979, fierce opposition arose in Israel, with critics arguing that it was only a temporary agreement. Even when Menachem Begin signed the treaty and returned Sinai to Egypt, his critics continued to warn that peace with an Arab state did not guarantee a strategic change in the Middle East. One of the clearest expressions of this was the fear that Israel would find itself without strategic depth and with its back to the Mediterranean Sea - an expression repeatedly invoked in discussions of territorial withdrawal. In other words, even when a peace treaty was signed, some saw it as no more than a temporary respite in a protracted struggle.

The same pattern recurred with the peace treaty with Jordan in 1994. Strategically, the treaty was an important breakthrough: Israel succeeded in stabilizing another long border with an Arab state and turning it into a border of peace, adding 320 kilometers of strategic depth - the width of Jordan - against any ground threat from the east. Nevertheless, this treaty, too, encountered ideological opposition on the grounds that peace between states does not change the fundamental nature of the conflict, or, in Benjamin Netanyahu's words: "The peace treaty with Jordan does not change the central problem - the threat from the east." Some opponents argued that the treaty did not resolve the Palestinian problem, which remained in the heart of the country, and therefore did not constitute a genuine strategic change. Others, such as Rehavam Ze'evi, also opposed the treaty because they believed Jordan was a Palestinian state, and that a peace treaty fixing the Kingdom of Jordan's border strengthened it and prevented their preferred solution of transferring the Palestinians.

The fiercest opposition, of course, arose over the Oslo Accords in 1993. Here the opponents fully expressed Shamir's outlook: the idea that the Palestinians were changing only their language, not their goals.

Opponents of the agreement argued that the PLO's recognition of Israel did not reflect a genuine change, but was a tactical move within the framework of the "Phased Plan," intended to secure political gains. Netanyahu wrote at the time that formal peace did not guarantee security and that a Palestinian state would pose a grave threat to Israel: "Demilitarizing a Palestinian state is no solution, because territory cannot be demilitarized of small arms" (Where? 1995). In other words, the same underlying assumption recurred: agreements are meaningless because the Arabs' objective has not changed.

This outlook also makes it possible to evade all responsibility for failure. Those who hold it reject any blame for Israel's part in the failure of the Oslo process, arguing that Yasser Arafat had a phased plan. It also enabled Netanyahu and Naftali Bennett to evade their responsibility for the policy of " Hamas is an asset and the Palestinian Authority is a liability," which led to the October 7 massacre, and to place all the blame on the Palestinians, without distinguishing between Hamas and the PLO.

Yet an examination of regional reality over time reveals that this underlying assumption does not stand up to the facts. The answer to the claim that, after October 7, Israel must not seek an agreement with the Palestinians or relinquish any territory because such a concession would allow the debacle to recur is the treaty with Egypt - signed after the great debacle of October 6, and involving the return of all of Sinai to Egypt. The treaty has now endured for more than four decades. Since it was signed in 1979, no war has broken out between Israel and Egypt, and their shared border is one of Israel's most stable. The peace treaty with Jordan has likewise held for three decades. Despite political tensions and, at times, severe public criticism within Jordan, it carefully upholds the treaty and has even helped intercept missiles fired at Israel from Iran.

Moreover, in recent years these have been joined by the Abraham Accords, signed with additional Arab states, including the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. Here, too, it becomes clear that Arab states can change their policies toward Israel when they see a political or strategic interest in doing so. None of this is consistent

with the claim that the Arab world pursues a single, unchanging objective unaffected by reality or by Israel's policies.

This does not, of course, mean that the Arab-Israeli conflict is not real, or that hostility toward Israel has disappeared. But the history of the past four decades shows that policies and agreements do affect reality. Arab states do not act on the basis of a single, eternal ideology, but on a combination of interests, internal pressures and strategic considerations. When these conditions change, policy changes as well.

The gap between the outlook Shamir expressed and the reality in the region today is not merely a matter for historical debate, since his outlook is still prevalent in Israel. If one assumes that the conflict cannot be resolved because the Arabs' objective never changes, every diplomatic initiative is seen from the outset as futile. But if one acknowledges that regional reality has already proved that Arab states can change their policies toward Israel, the conclusion is entirely different: the conflict is not an inescapable fate, but a complex system of political interests that can be influenced.

This debate has accompanied Israeli society for decades. On one side is an outlook that views the conflict as an existential struggle unaffected by policies or agreements. On the other is an outlook that sees it as a political dispute that can be mitigated and even resolved through a combination of power and diplomatic settlements. The fact that the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan have endured for decades is evidence that reality is more complex than the outlook Shamir presented.

Ultimately, the history of the Middle East proves that the sea is not the same sea, and that the objective does not remain the same objective. It shows that states and peoples change their policies when conditions change. The real question is not whether such change is possible, but whether Israel is willing to reconsider this possibility. For if four decades of peace with Egypt

and three decades of peace with Jordan are not enough to prove that reality can change, it is hard to believe that any other fact will succeed in doing so.

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