

The New Middle East

by Shimon Peres with Arye Naor

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Review by Avery Kolers

One leader in this growing group is Israeli Foreign Minister and author of *The New Middle East*, Shimon Peres. Although Yitzhak Rabin's coalition entered the Knesset in 1992 on a wave of "pragmatism over ideology," it was not devoid of idealists in high places; and Peres, who has been largely responsible for the peace talks since the election, has spent two decades as the Labor Party's ranking dove. He has long understood the currency of linkage in the Middle East, the necessary shakiness and inadequacy of any solution to one problem that fails to address them all.

The New Middle East is Peres's vision, not his story.

He begins by mapping the remarkable path that led to the famous ceremony on the White House Lawn in September, 1993, only touching on his own past, his long career in Israeli government, and the growth of Israel through forty-five years of strife. Indeed, his focus is so remarkably off himself that his own face shows through only between the brushstrokes of the powerful picture of the future that he paints.

Still, the most stunning thing about the ideas that Peres discusses is not that they are so new; American, Israeli, Palestinian, and other intellectuals have been throwing ideas like these

around in one form or another for years. Rather, it is the source of these words that is most telling; the number-two man in the Israeli government, discussing a long-term plan for peace, prosperity, human rights, and democracy throughout the Middle East. Thus when Peres shatters myths he is shattering political ones, myths of strategic necessity and national interest; he is not shattering intellectual ones. But for some time now few people have doubted the limits of the imagination. Political myths are by far the most important myths to shatter.

Peres deals repeatedly with the issue of Israel's strategic depth. Long a powerful argument for keeping the Golan Heights, West Bank, and Gaza Strip, the need for strategic depth was questioned most persistently after Iraqi Scuds flew clear over the Territories. While admitting that nine miles (the width of Israel at its middle) is a very short distance. Peres in general dismisses strategic depth as

an outdated concept and calls for a whole new set of national defense goals:

"Classical strategy depended on three components: time, space, and quantity. The new military technology questions the importance of these elements. What value does time have if a ground-to-ground missile travels from Washington to Moscow in only six minutes? What significance do physical barriers- mountains, rivers, deserts- have when missiles can fly over or around them toward predetermined targets? In the face of nuclear, chemical, and biological warfare, what advantage do we reap from having hundreds of tanks, cannons, and jets?"

In place of the outdated, militaristic, orientation, Peres sees a long-term development toward democracy, a common market, and interdependence in the Middle East that will make war not merely undesirable but impracticable. Citing the example of France and Germany, ancient enemies who meshed their industrial sectors soon after World War Two in order to make war

Book Reviews

between them impossible, Peres proposes such an arrangement for the Middle East.

"The European Community of the Middle East," as it has been called, animates the second half of the book, in which Peres takes up regional subjects such as water and resources, mass communication and infrastructure, tourism, and the environment. In some ways a summation of conclusions reached in the long-term multilateral talks on these issues, this part of the book is once again visionary more for its source than for its content. But it also provides a holistic view of the Middle East; Peres acknowledges frankly that none of the issues will be solved individually, articulating the linkage that touches every facet of the new Middle East. For example, greater tourism (he notes that while almost 60 million people visit Spain each year, Israel and Egypt are accustomed to receiving only about 1.5 million) can only result from a peace in which superhigh-

ways run from Turkey to Morocco, Syrians can go to Israel and vice-versa, bombs do not menace downtown areas and tourist buses, and so on. Perhaps like no other politician in the region, Peres understands the importance of total peace, rather than simply a cessation of hostilities, in fostering the kinds of change he deems necessary for the Middle East.

Politically, Peres' position on broad issues is clear. He calls for democracy but notes that it cannot arise in the current environment. Instead, Peres feels that accompanying any real Middle East peace must be an increase in the standard of living throughout the area, a decline in religious fundamentalism, greater national and regional security, and a common market. But on narrower, more complex issues, Peres is less clear, perhaps necessarily so. He briefly attempts to debunk the common wisdom that Israel has nuclear-weapons capability, but his half-hearted words come off as a

requisite political nod rather than a serious argument, and the believability of the section is tarnished. True, it is difficult to prove a negative, but this is certainly not news to Peres, and the book would be stronger had he not tried. With similar success, he attempts to show that Israel, in its first year of existence, never forced the Palestinian from their homes. But his lack of proof leaves Peres appealing to his memory of David Ben-Gurion and the 1948 war. Again, the text is infused with an air of "unbelievability", and the entire book suffers as a result.

More important and also disappointing is his treatment of Islamic fundamentalism. His analysis of the subject seems informed by a reading of one book, Emmanuel Sivan's *Radical Islam: Medieval Thought and Modern Politics*, the only major source on the subject that Peres cites in his footnotes. Moreover, Peres seems to pay too much attention to class-based as-

sumptions about fundamentalism; that its adherents are ultra-poor, run-of-the-mill Muslim Arabs, radicalized by poverty. He fails to discuss the fundamentalists as the only real opposition to authoritarian regimes across the Arab world, the fact that people who might be called "card-carrying members," as opposed to mere sympathizers, are relatively few in number and are to a large degree university students, professionals, and popular clerics whose main problem is not poverty but foreign control, moral decay, and authoritarianism. Though rampant poverty is an immense problem in many Arab countries, its importance as a motivating factor, already great, should not unduly eclipse the utter lack of political freedom and responsible government anywhere the fundamentalists have been successful. In addition, Peres gives short shrift to the fact that these people are, indeed, devout Muslims; they are not latching onto Allah, as it were, for a quick fix. Failure to

understand now will lead only to a greater and far more tragic failure later when the traditional methods fail.

While unclear on the question of the actual shape of Palestine in the future, Peres proposes a confederation with Jordan and close economic ties among the three countries, and acknowledges the fact that regardless of the map's ultimate shape, the state of Palestine must become independent. He foresees a demilitarized nation with access to a major port (to be built in Gaza), hydro power (the construction of a Red Sea-Dead Sea canal), fresh water (most likely from Turkey), natural resources, and various other necessities. Thus, while failing sufficiently to treat sticky issues such as Jerusalem, Palestinian military power as a question of national survival and of sovereignty, and Israeli settlements, he is nonetheless remarkably candid for a high-ranking politician currently in office.

In light of this, he is even

more forthcoming on the issue of refugees. After reminding the reader that he "[n]owhere in the world is there a people who better know the meaning of personal, familial, and national suffering than the Jewish people," Peres turns the plight of Palestinian refugees as a problem of the present, refusing to become mired once again in the contentious dispute over "the reason for their situation" that never fails to divide the debaters and leave the actual refugees mired right where they are. He volunteers the Israeli army for a multinational effort to improve conditions and raise the quality of life in an effort to foster development, not simply relieve a day's hunger; and he sees the future in imparting dignity and Palestinian citizenship to the refugees, rather than merely alleviating some of their suffering. Again, his words are even more powerful from the pen of the Foreign Minister than they would be (and have been) from the mouths of intellec-

tuals.

Finally, with perhaps his most heartening flourish, Peres mentions the issue of terminology, specifically the use of the term "territories:"

"Some see [the West Bank and Gaza] as 'liberated territories,' others as 'occupied territories.' Still other prefer the more neutral term 'administered territories.' All are incorrect. There is no point in discussing geography while ignoring demography. The word territories is meaningless when such territories are inhabited. [...] The Gaza Strip has an area of 365 square kilometers (140 square miles), with a population of roughly 800,000. Gaza is not a territory; it is not only settled, it hits world records in population density. Those who speak of the territories without considering the Palestinians residing there are shutting their own eyes and throwing sand in the eyes of the public."

It is this kind of thinking that shatters myths, paves the road to peace, and highlights the immense difference between merely sitting on an expedient outcome and searching for a morally feasible one. ♻️