



ON THE

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THOUGHTS ON MAKING PEACE

By Abraham H. Foxman

As I sat on the White House Lawn at the signing ceremony between Israel and the PLO, my mind went back to the day, 14 years ago in the same place, when Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin agreed to peace. I remember how unadulterated my reactions were then — like others who have felt the Arab conflict with Israel so deeply, that moment of peace was unmatched. The unbelievable was happening; hope for the future, nothing was impossible. More analytically, I was convinced Israel was doing the right thing and things would get better.

On Monday, at the White House, I also was happy, but not in the same way. I was filled with excitement and pain and I tried to examine my reactions.

I agree with Mr. Rabin who has focused on the point that in order to achieve peace, Israel must come to terms with its enemies. I guess the same line could have been used when Egypt made peace with Israel, but it was not. It wasn't that Anwar Sadat had not been a real enemy; while terrorism was not its thing, Egypt and Sadat had been plenty nasty, including the surprise attack on Israel's holiest day, Yom Kippur. And yet, there was no need to talk that way because people were truly convinced, surprisingly so, that Sadat had undergone a transformation. On the surface it was the drama of the visit to Jerusalem, but in fact that was the culmination, though an immense step, of four years of evidence of change. And it wasn't that people believed that Sadat had become a lover of Zion, because that was ridiculous. But it was, on the other hand, something more than the fact that a number of points of national interest had pushed him in the direction of peace. There was somehow a belief in the sincerity of the man, so that when he uttered the rhetoric of peace, as overblown as it may have been at the time, there was a strong will to believe in what he was saying.

Now let me be clear. I think what has happened in Washington

this week is momentous, offers real hope for a changed Middle East, is a product of many changed circumstances, and deserves and needs as wide support as possible. We at ADL have not only advocated American Jewish support for Israeli decisionmaking, but have analytically concluded that change can only come through Israeli strength, American support for Israel, and a reduction in options for the Arabs. So it has transpired.

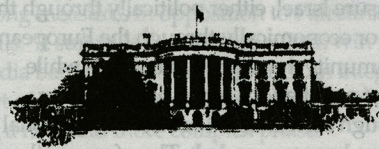
Still, I can't help my reaction. Necessity has driven Arafat to this day, and all who love peace should exploit this. But there is a difference between perceiving opportunity based on necessity and believing in the sincerity of Yasir Arafat. After all, it is not that long ago that the PLO was directly involved in terrorism. More than that, Sadat was the powerful head of the largest Arab state and could clearly implement what he agreed to. Even if Arafat has the will, does he have the ability to implement it, in the face of radical Palestinians, secular and religious, in the face of Israel's much more difficult security concerns than in the Sinai?

Every time these anxieties and doubts creep up on me, however, I remind myself that the current process is predicated on the absence of trust, on the need to demonstrate that necessity can be converted to trust. Will I feel differently about Arafat two years or five years from now than I do today?

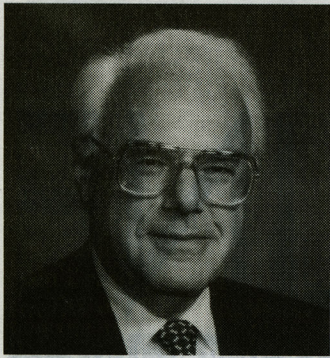
That is a personal question I ask which is reflected in the interim arrangement. Arafat should know, though some will try to convince him there are other ways, that the path to further Israeli concessions lies in convincing Israel that he has become trustworthy. His incentive to behave is immense.

And so I reassure myself. My anxiety about Arafat is natural and not cynical; it should temper one's euphoria, but it should do nothing to undermine the realization that what took place on the White House lawn is no less significant, and may yet prove even more momentous, than what happened there in 1979. □

Ceremony for the Signing of the Israel-Palestinian Agreement



*September 13, 1993
The White House*



Melvin Salberg

Chairman & Director's Corner



Abraham H. Foxman

The Israeli-Palestinian Agreement...

The signing of an agreement between Israel and the PLO to institute self-rule for the Palestinians in Gaza and Jericho and to establish relations between the two, is a breakthrough in the century-old Arab-Israeli conflict. Whether or not the Israeli-Palestinian part of the conflict is its core, as some would say, clearly this step is the most significant since Sadat's visit to and peace with Jerusalem.

The reasons for this breakthrough are many and have been widely discussed. The fall of the Soviet Union meant the decline of the PLO's major arms, terrorist and diplomatic supporter; the Gulf War, with PLO support for Saddam Hussein, led the Gulf states, the PLO's main financial providers, to cut off funds; the rise of Hamas, the Palestinian fundamentalists, generated a rival power base within the Palestinian camp that was growing in strength; the intifada and the role of negotiators gave the Palestinians in the territories more of an independent identity; the Labor Government in Israel was committed to moving the process forward through compromise and saw its political future tied to demonstrating its ability to succeed where Likud did not. All these factors converged to make it possible and necessary for the Rabin Government and the PLO to reach agreement.

Now that an agreement and mutual recognition are fact, now that Rabin and Arafat have shaken hands, there is much speculation

about where things are heading. It is useful to look at potential strengths that could emerge from the agreement, as well as potential dangers and difficulties as the process unfolds in the months and years ahead.

Possibly the most significant strength lies in the common interest that Rabin and Arafat have in seeing that self-rule works well. The message from Israel to the PLO is unmistakable: if it hopes to obtain greater Israeli concessions, it must show the Israelis during the period of self-rule that it wants to live in peace and that it commands sufficient authority to prevent those against peace from winning the day.

Second, the international community has an interest in success. The breakthrough itself should point up where involvement will be welcomed and where not: financial assistance to the Palestinians will be encouraged to heighten the incentive for responsible behavior. On the other hand, past efforts to pressure Israel, either politically through the UN or economically through the European community, have proved fruitless while direct negotiations of the parties, either through conventional or non-conventional means have succeeded. Therefore, on the diplomatic front, a restrained international community can prove to be a constructive one.

Thirdly, and surprisingly, the interplay among the negotiations is proving to be a positive force. Rabin himself, on a number of

occasions, expressed reservations about the Madrid process because it linked one part of the negotiations to others, thus in his view making one hostage to another. Instead, what appears to have taken place is that the negotiations, rather than inhibiting, may be pushing one another. Palestinians, reportedly, were concerned about the news that Israel and Syria might be moving ahead and, hence, motivated to move themselves; and now that the Palestinians have broken through, Israel and Jordan have signed an accord and the Syrians are reportedly rethinking their position.

Finally, if agreement is reached and day-to-day relations between Israelis and Palestinians take on a different tone, then what is already apparent will become more obvious: that the two parties share a common enemy, Islamic fundamentalism, which would like to see the demise of Israel and the Palestinian leadership. This should provide continuing incentive for further Israeli-Palestinian accords.

At the same time, the pitfalls ahead are large. Israel's consensus has long held the necessity of significant changes from the pre-1967 borders in any agreement with the Arabs, of preventing a Palestinian state, of keeping Jerusalem united under Israeli sovereignty, and opposing the return of Palestinian refugees. Of course, policies change and it is difficult to predict where Israeli policymakers will be on these issues down the road.

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