

Make Israel a bridge, not a barrier

A speech by Meir Pa'il, former Israeli soldier and parliamentary deputy, to the Schiller Institute.

Col. Meir Pa'il, a former member of the Israeli parliament, served in the Israeli Defense Forces for 28 years as a Brigade and Deputy Division Commander. He is now one of Israel's leading military strategists and historians. During the first week in October, he began a nationwide tour of the United States, to build support among the American people for American-Israeli political and economic cooperation to make peace in the region and develop the nations of the Middle East. Pa'il's program contrasts sharply with the policies of the Likud-Labor Party "government of national unity" now ruling Israel, which is narrowly focused on retaining Israeli control over the West Bank and other occupied territories as the sine qua non of "national security."

"I represent 15% of the Israeli population," Pa'il reports. "It is a minority, but a correct minority, and correct minorities have changed history before. Being in a minority does not mean you are mistaken."

This is an edited transcript of Meir Pa'il's address to the second international conference of the Schiller Institute in Wiesbaden, Federal Republic of Germany, on Sept. 24, 1984.

I am not representing Israel, regretfully, nor the Israeli government. I am just an Israeli. I think I have no right to represent the Jewish people—I am just Jewish. I'll try to combine my military, political, and academic education to present a few thoughts about that part of the world, the Middle East, in which I happen to live. I know that whatever one may say, Israel is a small country in a relatively big area and there are a lot of questions and problems (and also answers) about Israel. But I think it's about time that people try to think solemnly, calmly, and maybe without too much passion, about the future of our area. I shall try to put forth some ideas for you to think about. I consider you enlightened people.

The first idea is the claim that the Middle East must be considered as a part of the Third World, having gradually emerged after the Second World War. One may also call it the developing world, which is more or less the same for my practical purposes.

I think that the Schiller Institute is right in its claim that Western and Central Europe should be considered by the United States as the most important zone of cultural, econom-

ic, political, and to use your term, republican, and strategic interest. I share your views and I think that the U.S.A. should consider Europe as the most important area of interest. If you ask me, one can see that the Soviets do the same.

I think that the second important area of interest for the United States, logically, should be Eastern Asia—Japan, China, and so on. I call it Eastern Asia, because it is definitely time for us to refrain from using the old colonial definitions. If you are stationed in Paris or in London, you consider Israel as the Near East, Afghanistan as the Middle East, and China as the Far East. But if you look at the globe, it is just Eastern Asia. I think the second area of interest for the United States should be Eastern Asia; the Russians think more or less the same.

But I think, and this is a personal assessment, that the third important zone of interest for the United States should be the Middle East, just as it is for the Soviets. You can see that both sides are functioning in the Middle East—albeit the Soviets more than the Americans. You can see that some of the big powers, especially the Soviet Union, are getting involved in the Middle East not only politically and economically, but also militarily. Suffice it to mention Afghanistan. And there are more interventions. Here and there you can see a small, very small, American response.

A new Balkans?

But what is most disturbing is that if there is a zone in the world which resembles the Balkans area before the First World War, that is the Middle East. Perhaps, for the Middle East, the Second World War was the starting point of a process of balkanization. I'll mention some conflicts between the small countries or small national movements in the Middle East, and you will see that quite a lot of small nation-states and movements are fighting against each other. You can see Ethiopia against Somalia, Somalia against Ethiopia, Libya against Chad, Libya against Sudan, Syria against Israel, Israel against Syria, Jordan against Israel, Israel against Jordan, Lebanon with Syria and Israel on both sides, and Turkey against Greece, at least in Cyprus. You can also envisage possible Libyan-Egyptian hostilities and war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. I forgot to mention the important Iran-Iraq war and the struggles of the Kurds against the

Turks, the Iraqis, and the Persians combined, with here and there the Soviets trying to support one or another in this very protracted war.

So in the Middle East, we can see a very interesting and historical zone in the process of what one might call *near disintegration*. You can mention the Soviets or the Americans. But I don't think you should blame anyone that things have so deteriorated in our zone.

Should the United States or both big powers continue watching the boiling Middle East, each waiting for its small allies to win? Or should the United States, being an enlightened republic and a great power, do something to create a peace system in the Middle East, with or without the Soviets, and not wait for the small powers to continue their protracted wars, hoping that some of the small U.S. allies would have their way in the foreseeable future. I won't answer, but will only try to analyze.

If the big powers impose a solution, by political measures, or by economic measures, (hopefully not by military measures), should this solution follow the tradition of Yalta, by dividing the Middle East into zones of influence? Is this the best solution? Or should the big powers, or at least the United States and European civilization, strive toward a family of independent states in the Middle East, functioning as an important component of the Third World. This is a real question and one of the differences between the Middle East and Europe.

There was a Yalta conference, once, which divided Europe, which you criticize, and I share your anxiety over someone trying to establish a New Yalta. The Middle East, with much smaller economic capabilities, faces the danger that in the long run because of the conflicts, a Yalta may be imposed.

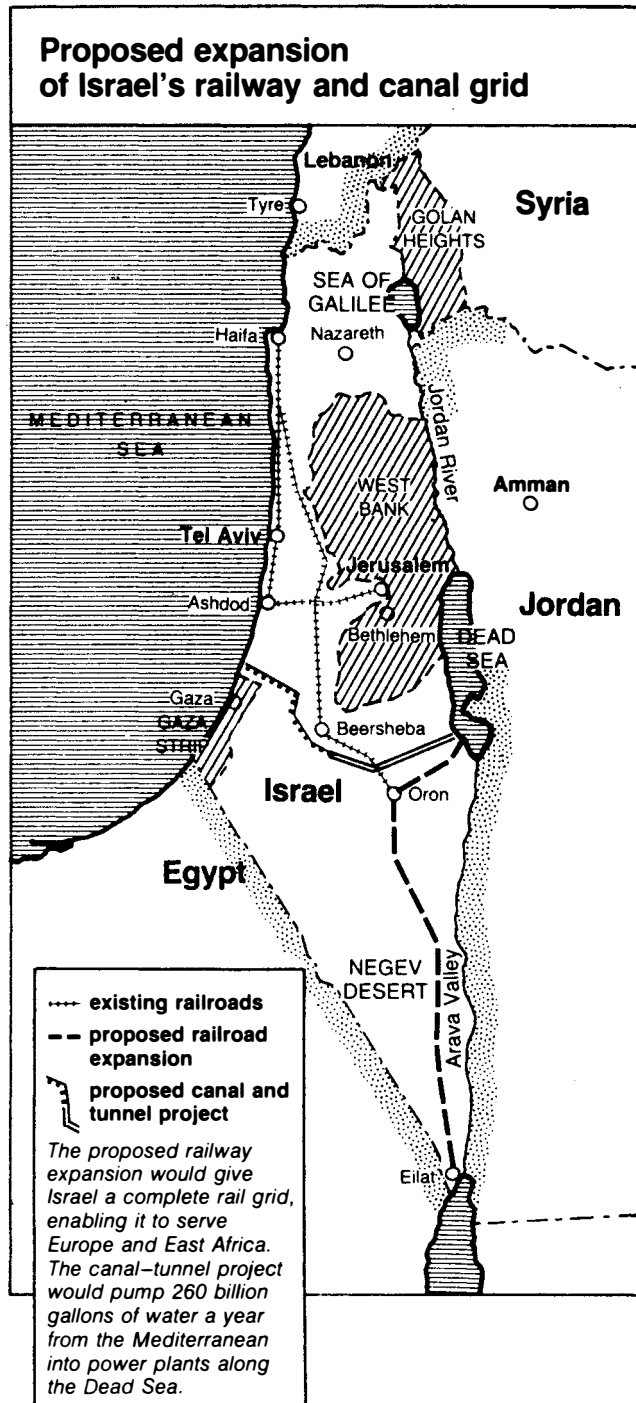
As a Middle Easterner and an Israeli, I would prefer the second solution. Both big powers, or all the big powers, should agree that the Middle East should function as part of the Third World and that the independent states would function as *truly* independent states, cooperating with one another economically, commercially, culturally, and so forth.

Since I am not an American citizen, nor a President, nor an adviser to a presidential candidate, I will not advise the Americans. But I would prefer that the Middle East follow the system of an area of independent nation-states.

For Israel, peace can be profitable

Now, I shall try to present the second subject, concerning what Israel could do if things develop from the bad to the better—in other words if some system of peace is established in the Middle East. As you can see from a map, Israel is stationed in the middle of the Middle East. If you consider the Middle East, or Western Asia or the Eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea, you will see that Israel is in the middle: a very interesting position. Moreover, one may say that Israel, as a state, is relatively, although not totally, developed. It's not a developing, but a relatively *developed* country.

During the era of war, in the near past and in the present, because we are still in a state of war between Israel and most of the Arab world, Israel has been, and is, a buffer and an enclave within the Middle East, dividing the North African Middle East from the Asian Middle East. If peace is established in our area, Israel can, and I hope would, function as a bridge, not as a barrier. We can establish a very interesting



bridge. For example:

Israel has the technological know-how to initiate joint irrigation projects in her vicinity, in northern Syria, on both sides of the Jordan Valley, in the Sinai, in the Israeli Negev, to use the water resources of the area to help every country to irrigate its land, all around and within Israel. The Nile, the Jordan, and the Litani rivers can be used. This is not colonialism, just cooperation based on mutual commercial ben-

“The crux of the matter is that many Arabs, many Israelis, and perhaps many people in the world think of my country, Israel, as a buffer imposed in the middle of the Arab world. They see Israel as a block dividing the Arab nations, or Arab nation, from one another. I think we can transform this barrier into a bridge, if we get Israel to build these railways, canals, and nuclear plants, in cooperation with the Arab world.

“It is not a dream. It can function. Peace is profitable.”

efits. Within this irrigation system, a system of power stations can be developed.

As a second project, it is possible to construct a canal and railway system, if it were profitable, from the Mediterranean coast, more or less in Haifa, to the Red Sea in Eilat, through what we call the Valleys of Yizreel and the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea, then to the southern side of the land between Israel and Jordan to the Red Sea. This canal could be a profitable project, for Israel, for Jordan, for whatever political entity is established on the West Bank—either a Jordanian district, or an independent Palestinian state, or some kind of a confederation among Israel, the Palestinians, and the Jordanians, or whatever.

A third project: Israel may function, and I hope would function, as a focus of land transportation in the Middle East. We are in the middle, and, insofar as peace is established, Israel can function as a transportation hub, especially for road and railway systems. I think we are sufficiently efficient to do this, giving good services to the commerce of the Middle East. We can allow and even help other countries to construct

petrol pipe lines, from Iraq and the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea, through Jordan and Israel. If you have peace, there is no problem.

I'm just trying to convince myself and my friends in Israel that peace is profitable.

One can even envisage, and some Israelis are working on this, the building of nuclear power plants in the Sinai, as an Israeli-Egyptian project helping both countries to supply relatively cheap energy, and maybe good enough to supply electricity to other states. If that works, one could envisage establishing nuclear plants in other parts of the Middle East. This is the best utilization of deserts. One may add what technological-scientific and health-services support a small, relatively developed country like Israel can offer surrounding countries. If this works, I must then warn European industries they may have to compete with our industries.

So call me a dreamer if you will, but I think that the crux of the matter, for us Israelis, for our existing adversaries, (most of the Arabs, but not all, since we have peace agreements with the Egyptians which I hope will deepen and become a comprehensive agreement with the Arab world), the crux of the matter is that many Arabs, many Israelis, and, perhaps, many people in the world think of my country, Israel, as a buffer imposed in the middle of the Arab world. They see Israel as a block dividing the Arab nations, or Arab nation, from one another. I think we can transform this barrier into a bridge if we get Israel to build these railways, canals, and nuclear plants, in cooperation with the Arab world.

It is not a dream. It can function. Peace is profitable.

Now I would just like to say one thing. Is it legitimate, is it right, is it nice to ask some of your big friends to help your country to establish peace? Or should those big, very interesting friends step aside and let the Middle East deteriorate voluntarily? Maybe it is quite time for the big powers to consider the danger, and not wait for the small peoples there to make peace only for themselves. Because, regrettably, if you examine the Balkan precedent of the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, you can see that the small nations, especially new ones without an old tradition of independence, are perhaps too inclined to be radically nationalistic, even chauvinistic. I would prefer that we take the step of making peace on our own initiative.

I have been fighting in Israel for about 15 years on the political level, trying to convince my government, my fellow countrymen, to do something for peace, even to offer most of the territories we occupy since the Six-Day War, for peace. I am not sure my and my friends' efforts have proved successful. So the question is, is it legitimate or proper that a human being like myself, an Israeli, should ask the friends of Israel to help us manipulate a peace, even if we have to pay for the peace and to pay with a big part of the territories which we happen to occupy?

If you ask me, this payment is profitable for the future of Israel. Thank you.