

PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST : THE WAY FORWARD

1995 Sam Cohen Memorial Lecture, by Senator Gareth Evans QC, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Melbourne, 10 September 1995

Sam Cohen was a fine Parliamentarian, lawyer, socialist, member of the Jewish community, husband and father, and all round gentleman. He was eloquent and persuasive in debate, and possessed among his many attributes that rare skill - especially rare, we Labor right-wingers would say, in a man of the left! - as a builder of consensus, even on some of the most contentious issues. Respect for his stance on civil liberties, and his contributions to education and science, remains to this day.

It is one of the tragedies of modern Labor history that he was cut down in his prime in 1969 at the age of just fifty, three years before - after twenty-three years in the darkness - the ALP came back into government. It can only now be guessed at what difference he might have made to the stability and reputation for competence of a government which came to badly need both in its three short years in office.

Sam Cohen's memory continues to command affection across a wide range of opinion within the Australian community. Not the least of his admirers has been my father-in-law, Jock Anderson, a contemporary of Sam's on the Wesley School debating team, who remembers him fondly as "colourful, warm-hearted and thoroughly likeable". I personally didn't ever really have much more than fleeting contact with him. But I do know Judith and Susan, and anyone who chose, and produced, relatives like that couldn't possibly be all bad...

Sam of course was no stranger either to controversy or the cause of Israel - and the two have tended to be inseparable in post-War international relations. He made a profound commitment to Israel, and to peace, and demonstrated both in his tenure as President of the Jewish Council to Combat Fascism and Anti-Semitism in the late 1950s. He would have been delighted to see the current progress towards peace that we are witnessing in the Middle East. Given the peace building role which he played throughout his public life, it is appropriate in his honour that I should focus again tonight - as I have on some notable previous occasions with this community! - on the prospects and problems of the Middle East peace process.

The good news that I can report - following my visit in July to Egypt, Gaza, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Tunisia - is that the peace environment is very much better than when I last visited the region in May 1992. The less good news is that progress on the different tracks continues to be very variable, that there is still a long and painful road to travel

before anything like a durable and comprehensive Middle East peace can really be envisaged, and that some of the windows of opportunity for major steps forward that are presently still open may start to slam shut, for the indefinitely foreseeable future, by the end of this year.

On balance, however, I am more optimistic than pessimistic, because some basic things do seem to have changed. Tom Friedman, now the Foreign Affairs columnist for the *New York Times*, and the author of what I continue to believe is the best book ever written on the Middle East, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, tells the story of a very religious Jew named Goldberg who wanted to win the lottery:

Every Sabbath Goldberg would go to Synagogue and pray: "God, I've been such a pious Jew all of my life. What would be so bad if I won the lottery?" But the lottery would come and Goldberg wouldn't win. This would go on week after week, month after month. Goldberg would go to Synagogue, pray to the Lord for deliverance, but the lottery would come and Goldberg wouldn't win. Finally one Sabbath, Goldberg couldn't take it any more. He wailed to the heavens "God, I've been such a good Jew all of my life, what do I have to do to win the lottery?" And suddenly the heavens parted and the voice of God boomed out, "Goldberg, give me a chance. Buy a ticket."

Friedman says that for years the Israelis and Palestinians both reminded him of Goldberg, each beseeching deliverance, but neither really ready to buy the ticket - to make the fundamental compromises and sacrifices necessary for a peace settlement. But then came at last that handshake on the White House lawns in September 1993, followed less than a year later by the perhaps more easily envisageable handshake between Prime Minister Rabin and Jordan's King Hussein, and a further flurry of diplomatic activity that seemed to make even a handshake between Yitzhak Rabin and President Assad of Syria - and all that would then follow for a normalisation of relations with Lebanon - seem a real possibility.

The extraordinary confluence of events of the late 1980s and early 1990s - the end of the bi-polar world, the invasion of Kuwait and the eventual defeat of Saddam Hussein, the serious errors of judgment of Chairman Arafat and PLO, and President Assad's recognition of the consequences for Syria of the demise of its Soviet patron - created the greatest opportunity in many years to forge a regional peace agreement. To its eternal credit (though it wasn't given much at the time, either in Israel or the diaspora) the Bush Administration seized that opportunity. Jim Baker's peace bus developed a momentum that the Shamir Government could not resist.

But Israel was a reluctant passenger. Mr Shamir was prepared, he admitted later, to string the autonomy talks with the Palestinians out for ten years while populating the occupied territories with half a million settlers. In May 1992 I found no grounds for believing that anyone in authority in Israel was seriously trying to break out of the vicious cycle of

violence and retaliatory repression which flowed inevitably from Likud's refusal to accept the principle of land for peace in the Palestinian context. I still recall, with profound pain, my distress and my despair at the time at what seemed likely to destroy all that mattered about the dreams of enlightened Zionism. It would have been profoundly unacceptable to anyone from the Labor tradition, or indeed to any fair-minded Australian, to countenance the likely substitution for the dreams of Ben Gurion of the bitter, ugly exclusivism of the heirs to the Jabotinsky school of Zionist thinking.

For now, thankfully - for the time being at least - that nightmare has passed. We have seen new courage and determination among both Israeli and Palestinian leaderships to forge the peace of which dreams are made. Let me rehearse, briefly, how that determination has been given practical effect since the Madrid Conference of October 1991.

Israel and the Palestinians

On September 9 1993, after almost two years of bilateral talks, a breakthrough occurred in Israeli-Palestinian relations. As a result of intense behind-the-scenes contacts between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators in Oslo - for which the Norwegian intermediaries deserve enormous credit - PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat sent a letter to Prime Minister Rabin, in which he stated unequivocally that the PLO recognised the right of Israel to exist in peace and security; accepted UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338; committed itself to a peaceful resolution of the conflict; renounced the use of terrorism and other acts of violence; assumed responsibility over all PLO elements to ensure their compliance, prevent security violations and discipline violators; affirmed that those articles of the PLO Covenant which deny Israel's right to exist were now inoperative and no longer valid; and undertook to submit to the Palestinian National Council for formal approval the necessary changes to the Covenant.

In reply, Israel recognised the PLO as the representative of the PLO in the peace negotiations, effectively accepting at last that the only means of addressing the issues between them was through the PLO leadership then located in Tunis.

On 13 September, 1993, the joint Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles (DOP) was signed by the two parties in Washington, outlining the proposed interim self-government arrangements, as envisioned and agreed by both sides. The arrangements contained in the DOP included immediate Palestinian self-rule in Gaza and Jericho, early empowerment for the Palestinians in West Bank, and an agreement on self-government and the election of a Palestinian Council.

The DOP deferred negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians on the nature of the final settlement between the two sides on remaining issues - including some of the toughest of them all: Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, security arrangements, and borders.

The so-called permanent status negotiations were to begin no later than the beginning of the third year of the interim period (May 1996). And the permanent status agreement reached in these negotiations was to take effect five years after the implementation of the Gaza-Jericho agreement, namely May 1999.

Shortly after the signing of the Declaration of Principles, negotiations commenced in Cairo and Paris between Israeli and PLO delegations on the implementation of the first stage of the interim arrangement, namely the Gaza-Jericho aspect. The Gaza-Jericho Agreement was signed in Cairo on 4 May, 1994, and applies to the Gaza Strip and to a defined area of about 65 square kilometers including Jericho and its environs. The negotiations were completed after seven months of discussions. Central to the talks were issues involving the security of Israeli settlements as well as external security on the boundaries and crossing points. The document includes agreement regarding a withdrawal of Israeli military forces from Gaza and Jericho, a transfer of authority from the Israeli Civil Administration to a Palestinian Authority, the structure and composition of the Palestinian Authority, its jurisdiction and legislative powers, a Palestinian police force, and relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

The significance of these events was reinforced by the historic meeting of 25 July 1994 between Prime Minister Rabin and King Hussein of Jordan, culminating in the conclusion of the peace treaty between the two countries which was signed on 26 October 1994. Following the blueprint set out in their peace treaty, the two sides have made significant headway in regard to security, water, borders and territorial matters. In addition, Israel and Jordan are actively developing their bilateral cooperation both directly and within the regional context, in regard to such areas as economy, tourism, natural and human resources, and infrastructure.

When I was in Israel and Gaza all attention was focused on the Israel-Palestinian track negotiations to take the Declaration of Principles implementation the next step forward - i. e. negotiations to agree on the arrangements for the election of the Palestinian Council, and to set the conditions for that election. It is only when that elected Council is in place that negotiations on the permanent status issues can really begin, and May 1996 is fast approaching. By comparison with the issues still awaiting resolution in the final status negotiations, the matters presently being negotiated seem positively straightforward - election modalities (the size of the Council, eligibility to stand and balloting arrangements), and security arrangements, including in particular the deployment of Israeli troops during the election period in both the major towns and in the occupied territories generally. But many of these issues have in practice proved sticky; others, like the release of prisoners and water rights, have assumed potentially show-stopping prominence; and target date after target date has slipped.

Yasser Arafat was certainly anxious and on edge about the outstanding issues when I spoke to him, not wanting to make any more compromises, but knowing that more were

inevitable if the process was to be kept alive. Yitzhak Rabin, by contrast, projected calmer confidence - perhaps easier then, when there had been several months free of major terrorist incident, than now when, tragically, that has ceased to be the case. But the underlying mood on both sides seemed to be one of genuine belief that the deal was both do-able and had to be done - and current expectations are that outstanding issues will be capable of agreement now within a matter of just a few more weeks, which will still allow for a Council election to be held by the end of this year or very early next.

The mood of the times was summed up best for me in an exchange I had with Prime Minister Rabin. At one point in our conversation I was extolling the virtues of flexibility on a particular aspect of the current Israel-Palestinian negotiations when I paused, and said to the PM: "I guess I'm really preaching to the converted on this one". The Prime Minister was silent for a moment, then he said - with a little smile playing around the edge of his lips - "The committed, not the converted".

There may not be much in Yitzhak Rabin of that passion one always senses in Shimon Peres, a real emotional commitment to peace through reconciliation with the Arab world. Nor is there not much evidence of enthusiasm for Peres's larger sustaining vision - which I for one find enormously attractive - of a Middle East harnessing its economic and intellectual and natural resources cooperatively together for the enhancement of the common good. But Rabin knows with his head, as David Ben Gurion did so many years before him, that Israel had to trade land for peace - that it could not be simultaneously Jewish, democratic and occupy the whole of Biblical Israel. And he had believed that land could be traded for peace, albeit slowly, cautiously, and giving away at each stage no more than absolutely had to be given away.

The key to the acceptance of the bargain by the Israeli people was the realisation - that came to a head with the war of the knives against the Israelis in the later stages of the *intifada* - that they were safer without the occupied territories, separated from them, than they were with them. The Scuds in the Gulf War had, moreover, already graphically demonstrated the diminution in significance of the territories as a strategic asset. It was only then a matter of accepting a Palestinian negotiating partner. And with the choice reduced to Arafat or Hamas, then - whatever you think of Arafat's past, whatever you think of his political and administrative leadership now - there was simply no choice.

All this the head dictated and Rabin accepted - and nothing has happened yet to change the equation. Isolated acts of terrorism - shocking and appalling as they have been - have not to date thrown the equation out of balance. Nor should they. There is always the risk that extremists on both sides will resort to ever more outrageous acts of terrorism as the only means available to roll back the progress that has been achieved - and that enough of them will over time result, as Friedman puts it, in turning "the passive majorities for peace into passive majorities for confrontation". Acceptance by Israelis of the inevitability of some form of Palestinian state has increased dramatically - from 37 per cent in 1990 to 74

per cent by 1994 (on Jaffee Centre figures), - but nobody really doubts that that majority is still fragile.

If the present Palestinian track negotiations do succeed, as it is reasonable to expect they will, that will constitute no more than the end of the beginning of the peace process. Most of the really big questions remain for the final status talks. That means sovereignty, settlement, refugees and above all Jerusalem. At the end of the day, though that day is still some years away, I believe the Palestinians will have a homeland in what is now the West Bank and Gaza. At what point the Palestinians will exercise full control over all aspects of their territory remains to be seen. Increasingly, however, the capacity of Israel to interfere in the process of Palestinian self-determination will recede. Though there are understandable teething problems at the moment, I have every confidence that the Palestinians will over time acquit fully their responsibility to protect the security of their territory and that of their neighbours.

How many refugees will be allowed to return to Palestinian territory by the Palestinian authorities remains problematic: this is an issue which it is obvious at the moment nobody wants to even begin to talk about - except the displaced Palestinians still in Sabra and Shatila and elsewhere around the region.

The settlers issue is going to be enormously difficult to resolve - apart from the nearly 200,000 Jews now living in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood annexed since the 1967 War and now outnumbering the Arabs living there, there are more than 100,000 other Jews living in over 130 locations elsewhere on the West Bank. To maintain them will be potentially explosive for any Palestinian Government; to forcibly uproot them will be politically explosive for any Israeli Government. The situation cries out for a moderate and conciliatory response by both sides, with the maximum effort being made to secure the voluntary return to Israel of as many as possible of those now living in the Palestinian heartland. Hopefully a combination of economic and security self-interest will lead the overwhelming majority of Jewish settlers to make that decision, and arrangements will be able to be negotiated to cover the situation of those absolutely determined to remain.

The most difficult problem of all is obviously Jerusalem, which poses special sensitivities for the regional outlook because of its enormous symbolic significance for Jews, Moslems and Christians. All sides will face enormous difficulty in resolving a question which is central to their identities and aspirations, and their perception of what their rights are. In one of the less well-known, but more insightful comments on Middle East diplomacy, the then Jordanian Prime Minister, Zaid al Rifai, told Henry Kissinger in 1973 that whether Jerusalem was first item or last on the agenda of the ill-fated Geneva Conference held in December that year, there would be no peace in the Middle East until the issue was resolved. That advice remains true today.

There are worrying signs of extreme inflexibility on this subject. Certainly I found no preparedness in Israel to reconsider the government's stance on the unity of Jerusalem under exclusive Israeli sovereignty. Opinion polls in Israel suggest that only 14 per cent of Israelis would even be willing to see the issue discussed with the Palestinians. This absence of change in fundamental positions exists despite widespread and general support for the peace process, and despite the reality that achieving an acceptable outcome on the issue of Jerusalem is a vital part of that process.

While it would be of enormous satisfaction to see, eventually, a unification of Jerusalem along lines which met the aspirations of each of the parties with legitimate interests in that question, it is quite possible to believe that the final status of Jerusalem may never be resolved to the satisfaction of either Israelis or Arabs. Neither side is likely to make a formal concession to the other regarding the substance of their respective claims. I have always thought, and often said, that a "two flags" solution is the only viable formal resolution - recognising as it does that neither side is ever likely to formally renounce its own claim to sovereignty over East Jerusalem - but maybe even that will prove too hard for the foreseeable future.

The key to a durable solution under those circumstances will be a willingness to agree at least that the exercise of sovereignty by any party will need to be tempered by recognition of the importance of the issue to each other, and to their common future. Overlapping claims to sovereignty will, at the very least, have to be translated into practical arrangements which preserve the political, religious and cultural identity of each of the parties. The key task, and one which will take much time and effort to resolve, will be to give each of them, at a minimum, de facto control over that which is their own. That at least ought to be achievable, with even a modicum of good will, in the medium term.

Israel and Syria

Since the Madrid Conference, talks between Israel and Syria have been carried out in Washington in the framework of the Madrid bilateral negotiations. Contacts between Israel and Syria have been assisted, increasingly, through the involvement of Secretary Christopher and senior American officials. Israel has made clear that it is willing to consider withdrawal from the Golan Heights in the context of a peace settlement which simultaneously addresses four key issues: territory, security arrangements, normalisation of relations, and the time-table for implementation. Syria has made it plain that peace will not be possible without the return of the Golan heights to Syrian sovereignty, but it has been willing to at least commence substantive negotiations on the substantive issues. President Assad has sent a variety of signals to his people that peace with Israel is on the agenda, even if he has been careful to avoid clarification of what peace will mean, and what form it might take. And progress has been made on some important collateral issues, in particular the long-standing problem of Syrian Jews, which has now been effectively resolved with recognition of their freedom to emigrate if they so choose.

When I met Assad in Damascus in July, he conveyed the impression to me of being rather more relaxed about the peace process with Israel than had been the case in our previous meetings. When, for example, I told him about Yitzhak Rabin's "Committed, not converted" line, he laughed out loud - with what seemed to be appreciative amusement, and respect for a fellow hard-nose, rather than anything in the nature of derision. There was much less disposition to monologue, and much more willingness to engage in genuine discussion of the substantive issues outstanding.

Certainly some of the outstanding Syrian-track issues are very difficult - and probably none more so than the argument as to whether the final boundary to be recognised will be the 1922 international border defined between the British and French during the Mandate period, which slightly favours Israel, or the 1949 Armistice line as it stood before the June 1967 War, which favours Syria. But the Israel-Syria deal is, in technical terms, just about the most do-able deal, Israel-Jordan apart, in the whole Middle East peace process. Even the current show-stopper (about early warning facilities on the Golan, which Syria wants dismantled and which Israel wants to continue to be manned by Israelis) seems fairly readily resolvable, for example by agreement to keep the facilities, but man them with MFO-type international peace keepers.

The trouble is that there seems no real mood on either side to accelerate the negotiation process. And that is a problem when the window of opportunity that has been opened seems ominously close to closing as elections draw nearer in both Israel and the United States. It will be harder and harder for Rabin to hold his fragile Labor coalition together - particularly on the Syrian process - as the temptations of electoral grandstanding grow stronger. And the United States's capacity for hard nosed decision making, on any issue as domestically sensitive as this, seems likely to be out-to-lunch once the presidential primary season commences early next year, if not before.

I am not clear whether Yitzhak Rabin ever really wanted a settlement of the Syrian track before the Israeli elections, or whether - with all the hard decisions in relation to settler removal and so on that an agreement would require - he just wanted the process to have seriously started. The advantage in pushing the matter to conclusion, on the other hand, would obviously be not only in having delivered peace with Syria but in immediately creating the conditions for the resolution of all outstanding issues in relation to Lebanon as well - including creating the conditions, in turn, for a major diminution of the role and status of Hezbollah.

In the event, the Syrian President now seems likely to have lifted Rabin from the horns of his dilemma: for the time being anyway, Assad is apparently letting his natural caution about giving away too much too soon overcome his anxiety about the possibility of having to deal, after next year's election, with Likud. It needs to be appreciated, though, that the

Syrian refusal to participate in the multilateral tracks of the peace process, and Syria's reluctance to give any clear indication of what peace with Israel would mean in practical terms, is more than just a matter of hard bargaining. The question of peace goes to the heart of what it means to be an Arab state in a wholly new regional environment. At issue for President Assad is the destiny of Syria, and his and his country's self image as the embodiment of Arab nationalism, an image shaped in significant measure by its conflict with Israel. He seems some way away yet from being able to make the necessary psychological adjustment - but at the same time I would not assume that reluctance to be permanent.

The wider context

In the wider Arab-Israeli context, there is abundant evidence of quiet but effective contact-building and problem-solving among regional experts. Beyond the political spotlights, an environment is being created, especially through the multilateral tracks of the peace process, where scientists and other professionals in their various fields are addressing common concerns and thinking and planning in regional terms. Provided this process remains in a constructive balance with ongoing negotiations on political issues, it is bound to foster, in the long term, a convergence of expectations and norms of behaviour.

We saw this in microcosm when Australia hosted something as mundane as a rainfall enhancement seminar at Terigal in April 1995, involving delegations from Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Morocco, Oman and the Palestinians. There were political differences, which were recognised, but there was also a clear development of positive chemistry among participants as they worked together. And, most importantly, there was a strong sense of commitment to building new and more constructive approaches to problems which can only be addressed on a regional basis.

The convening of the Middle East/North Africa Economic summit, in Casablanca in October 1994, the follow-up summit to be held in Amman in October this year, and the proposed creation of a Middle East Development Bank, are all further signs of the emergence of a new willingness among the parties of the region to enter into new joint collaborative ventures. There is, obviously, resistance to this process of establishing normal bilateral dealings. But the trend towards more normal dealings is clear. And Arab regimes which choose not to adapt constructively to new regional realities face the prospect of collapsing under the weight of their own inertia as the region confronts deep-seated and growing demographic, economic and environmental problems.

Israel will, perfectly understandably and reasonably, continue carefully to calibrate its position on the peace process to the evidence of preparedness among Israel's neighbours to accept her right to exist in security and accommodate her security interests. My discussions with leaders of the Palestinians and key Arab countries left me in no doubt

that such security was on offer. But that offer is conditioned on the Arab side by demands for dignity and justice. Those concerns go as deeply into the political and social bedrock of Arab societies as security does for Israelis.

Tom Friedman, in the new edition of his book *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, describes the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as having focused in the past on the question of rights rather than interests: what was particularly revolutionary in Sadat's initiative when he came to Jerusalem in November 1977 was 'its ability to transform the debate with Israel about relations with Egypt from a debate about rights to a debate about interests'. This analysis certainly offers a key to what might be the way forward in the peace process, as well as a way of explaining what has been achieved until now. While rival views of what justice might mean in the Middle East context are probably irreconcilable, each party's interests - in particular their security, economic and political long-term interests, as entities with a role to play not only in the region, but also globally - may well converge. This is why each of the parties needs to move towards cooperative problem solving. The basic task will be to win acceptance for approaches to peace based on seeking security with others, rather than against others.

The forces of bigotry and iconoclastic politics will of course resist such efforts. Tragically, there may be continuing attempts to destroy, through terror, the aspirations upon which the peace process is based. Recent bombing outrages in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem are tragic reminders of the despicable depths to which certain extremists will sink in pursuit of their objectives. Such activity lends undue credence to other opponents of the peace process, who may seek deliberately to confuse long-term security interests with short-term political gains. It is all too easy to use fears about the larger security environment as a pretext for actions designed to achieve narrowly focused political goals.

Inevitably there is also resistance to change, and fear of the unknown. There is apprehension that the hopes and dreams of generations on both sides will not be realised. There are doubts on both sides about the willingness of the other to make a lasting peace, and to leave behind the anguish and hurt of the past. Some prominent Arabs claim to see the peace process as a device to realise Israeli ambitions of regional hegemony. On the Israeli side, there are those who see the process as just another tactical step towards Arab conquest of the Jewish nation forged in their midst. And yet such attempts, on both sides, to shore up the demonology upon which so much of the political life of the region has been based, sound increasingly hollow. Their stridency reflects a growing realisation that the familiar interpretations of regional realities are eroding away, to be replaced by something more challenging, less certain, but ultimately more hopeful than before.

While these debates rage, it is increasingly evident that key issues beyond immediate political differences also have to be addressed soon. The difficulties facing the region in dealing with this matrix of security and political issues, and the urgent need to do so, are illustrated by emerging problems with water. A decade ago, analysts were pointing out

that peace in the Middle East would be impossible without agreement over secure and adequate water sources. The issue is now emerging as a key element in the regional security outlook and as a strategic factor between the parties. By 2025, according to the World Bank, the amount of water available to each person in the Middle East and North Africa will have fallen by 80 percent in a single lifetime. Superior power alone cannot provide durable answers to water problems, which are both technically complex and politically sensitive. Cooperation will be essential if the interlinked and deep-seated problems of rapid urbanisation, unbalanced socio-economic structures, and population pressures are to be resolved.

The issue of weapons of mass destruction in the region provides a further illustration of the importance of dealing with the contradictions, real and perceived, between the short term political gains and the long-term security objectives of both Israel and its neighbours. Regional peace will be very difficult indeed to sustain in the absence of progress towards arms control. Peace agreements which do not lead to progress on arms control issues will leave open important questions at the popular level about the commitment of both sides to those agreements. If leaders are not prepared to question existing security assumptions, wider audiences cannot be expected to do so. The establishment of effective long-term disarmament and arms control regimes therefore represents an imperative for peace and security in the region. There is a case for keeping a close eye on power balance considerations, and there are genuine strategic dilemmas for Israel in the development of weapons of mass destruction elsewhere in the region. But even if Israeli approaches to security may continue to take deterrence as their starting point, those approaches should not be allowed to end there.

Real military security for all countries in this region will rest ultimately upon the strengthening of global instruments designed to improve dialogue, transparency, trust and confidence building, and to bring weapons of mass destruction under tightly verifiable control. All countries should be members of, and abide fully by, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. All countries of the region should join the Chemical Weapons Convention, and ratify it. All regional countries should become original signatories of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. I have argued repeatedly and at length to each leader I met during my most recent visit that each one of these regimes deserves support and adherence in its own right. Nothing is to be gained, and much is to be lost, by each being made conditional on the other, or on some other circumstance.

Australia's role

That leads me to address, finally, the question of where does Australia fit into all of this? We are neither a party to the Arab-Israel conflict nor ever likely to be able to play a major diplomatic role in mediation or the like. But we have important economic, strategic, political and humanitarian interests in the region. We are not concerned solely with boosting our exports to the Middle East, though that is an abiding national interest. We

share the strong global interest, strategically and economically, that exists in stability in the Middle East. Conflict retains the potential to affect access to the region's energy resources and to disrupt important supply lines. And of course we share with like-minded countries humanitarian concerns about the suffering which war and conflict bring to innocent populations.

Those interests by themselves are enough for us to want to make the kind of contribution we have been making through the multilateral arm of the peace process. Australia has been an active participant in the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group, developed from the Madrid Conference as the appropriate forum for negotiating regional arms control measures, because we have felt we had some positive expertise to contribute as a country with a long track record of involvement in weapons of mass destruction issues, especially the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty issues.

Of the many non-defence issues which are crucial to the region's stability in the future, we have taken most interest in that of water security, both because of its intrinsic importance and because again of our expertise in that field, and we have been accordingly an active contributor to the Water Resources Working Group.

Quite apart from any of this, Australia will remain interested and involved in the Middle East simply because the region means so much for so many Australians of Jewish and Arab descent, and because we do believe so strongly as a nation - as we always have - in the rights of both Jews and Arabs to have homelands in the region in which they can live in peace.

As I came to the end of my last visit to Israel I felt reassured - much more than I had been in 1992 - that the idealism which gave birth to the rise of Israel has not diminished. Present Israeli leaders have demonstrated not just a strong commitment in principle to the peace process, but real courage and resolve - reinforcing the sheer guts of ordinary Israelis in this respect - in facing terror in their midst, burying their dead, and yet going down the road to peace, in a way that has been an inspiration to us all. I hope and believe that commitment can be sustained in practice through all the trials that lie ahead.

Achieving durable security is not only a matter of understanding the interests and interaction of states. It also requires mutual understanding of the ways in which both leaderships and their peoples see the world, themselves and each other. As the American writer David Shieler once observed:

Whatever happens in war or diplomacy, whatever territory is won or lost, whatever accommodations or compromises are finally made, the future guarantees that Arabs and Jews will remain close neighbours in this weary land, entangled in each other's fears. They

will not escape from one another. They will not find peace in treaties or in victories. They will find it, if they find it at all, by looking into each other's eyes.

The present Israeli Government has been looking into the eyes of its neighbours. I applaud what Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres and their colleagues have done - as I am sure Sam Cohen would have done had he still been with us. I applaud the progress that has been achieved so far; encourage all those involved, directly or indirectly, to take every possible step to keep the momentum going; and pledge myself to play whatever part I usefully can to bring about a lasting peace in this region that continues to touch all our hearts so much.