



Israel: Why Not Investigate Opportunities, Too?

By Roberta Fahn Schoffman

Roberta Fahn Schoffman, representing IPF in Israel, heads MindSet, Media and Strategic Consulting in Jerusalem

Here in Israel, this year so far is most remarkable for the number of commissions of inquiry that have been established. Clearly the crowded lineup is a humiliating reminder of how far this country has slipped into disarray. On the other hand, it is testimony to our thriving democracy and the ability of the rule of law -- even as it is directly undermined by those responsible for maintaining it -- to prevail.

One is struck by the multiple layers of authority and decision-making that come into play when the normal channels of governance go off the rails. Former judges and generals are being recruited one after the other to try to keep this country honest. Or at least to keep us from confirming what Judge Vardi Zeiler, who headed up the committee examining police and prosecutorial malfeasance, bluntly warned at the close of his inquiry: "If the phenomenon I saw at this one narrow point has spread throughout the Israel Police - it's Sicily."

One wonders, with all of this talent deployed to clean up the mess made by public officials, what would happen if these same skills were directed forward, to yank us out of the diplomatic and political mire. In recent months, numerous commissions have been investigating the War in Lebanon, the Tax Authority, the police relationship with organized crime, the use of wiretapping, and many other issues critical to a vibrant democracy.

Meanwhile, rare opportunities for negotiations with our neighbors have surfaced, but have either been greeted with outright rejection or shoved to the back burner, or the back pages, as juicy scandals capture the attention of the public and politicians alike. This is not to say that official bodies responsible for strategic and security assessment aren't doing their job or taking a serious look at current developments. Just this week, the Cabinet was given an intelligence assessment for 2007 by Director of Military Intelligence Maj. Gen. Amos Yadlin, Mossad Director Meir Dagan, and General Security Services Yuval Diskin, who offered a worrying overview but claimed that the chances of war this year are low. This is reassuring; but as we've learned from the various inquiries into military and government performance in the last Lebanon war, the professionals may not always have all of the answers.

Understandably, the Olmert government is hesitant to embark on any controversial moves at this time, constrained by its need to maintain a stable coalition, at least until the Winograd commission presents its Lebanon findings in March and Labor holds its primaries in May. But as significant as these political considerations are, many Israelis feel that they should not come at the expense of embracing any opportunity to explore avenues that could lead to peace, or at least peace of mind. As Moshe Dayan said, and Yitzhak Rabin after him: If you want to make peace, you don't talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies.

In that spirit, here are three ways that the current Israeli leadership can turn its talent for establishing commissions to truly productive use, namely the examination of three specific peace initiatives:

(1) A Committee on the Saudi Initiative. Not too many years ago, the notion that Saudi Arabia would seek active involvement in mediating a peace arrangement in the region, with the approval of the Arab League, would have been considered ludicrous. But today, moderate Arab countries fearful of Shi'ite extremism and an ascendant Iran are attempting to broker a new paradigm in the Middle East, which also includes a Palestinian-Israeli agreement.

Dubbed the "Arab Quartet" by Ma'ariv journalist Ben Caspit, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, "are secretly setting up," in Caspit's words, "a strategic-security-intelligence axis to block the Iranian danger and the 'Shi'ite revolution.'" Caspit adds that they are "being joined by many other Islamic countries, some outside the region, such as Indonesia, who oppose the Iranian nuclear effort and also have serious concerns about the continued spread of Shi'ite Islam." For many Israelis, skeptics included, this seems like one of those rare windows of opportunity that it would be foolish to dismiss out of hand. The Committee on the Saudi Initiative would be charged with assessing the growing openness of the Arab Quartet to the West, and the role they might play in advancing a Palestinian-Israeli agreement.

(2) A Commission on the Syrian Option. Several prominent Israelis -- including Alon Liel, former Director-General of the Foreign Ministry and Ambassador to Turkey; Yaacov Perry, former head of the Mossad; and the distinguished author Sami Michael -- have already begun to lobby for a rethinking of our Syria policy, so why not appoint them in an official capacity? These experienced individuals can build on the assessment of the intelligence community that Syria is indeed

signaling its desire for a diplomatic process, but is not willing to make any significant gestures as yet, or give up its ties with Iran. According to this view, the probability of full-scale war provoked by the Syrians is low.

A Syria commission would quietly try to verify the intent of Syria to negotiate in good faith, examine its range of flexibility, and find out what it would take to reorient Syria away from the Iranian-Hezbollah axis and toward the moderate Arab camp. The commission could also try to mediate the dispute between the Mossad, which opposes talking to the Syrians, and Military Intelligence, which is open to the possibility. The bigger question, however, is to whether Israel should automatically accede to a US veto on entering talks with Syria. A supple and subtle Commission on Syria, working just outside the official boundaries of state diplomacy, might be the right place for a deep examination of the pros and cons -- based solely on Israeli strategic interests -- of conducting such talks.

(3) Finally, a Commission on the Mecca Agreement. Problematic as it may be in terms of the Quartet's three conditions -- recognizing Israel, renouncing violence, adhering to past agreements -- the fragile Hamas-Fatah rapprochement not only succeeds in including Saudi Arabia in as a major player, but is a welcome attempt to resolve the fierce intra-Palestinian conflict. For Israel, there is no value in the current stalemate vis-à-vis the Palestinians, nor can we benefit from a worsening humanitarian crisis or rising internecine violence.

Creative strategies are urgently required to bolster our less-than-ideal partner for peace, a weakened Abbas who must work with the democratically elected Hamas government, even if it refuses to recognize Israel. An Israeli Commission on Mecca would seek to outline a political horizon that would clarify parameters of statehood and the contours of a permanent agreement, and thus sweeten the vision that Abbas will be able to sell to his own public. The commission would also try to decipher the Mecca Agreement's implicit recognition of Oslo, and determine whether it conceivably signals a tilt by Hamas toward a two-state solution.

While it's true that governments are elected to lead the people, in these trying times the people may need to take the lead themselves. Everyone sees how this complex pot is being stirred. When we neglected to deal with the PLO, we got Hamas. As we neglect to deal with Hamas, we may get something even more extreme. But there may be simpler solutions stored in our pantry. Maybe we should look at the bright side of Zeiler's Sicilian analogy, focusing this time on pasta. A good chef can do wonders with wheat and water, a few tomatoes and a little garlic. We too may not have much to work with, but with patience and ingenuity we just might cook up some fresh ideas, a healthy platter of prospects to set on the national table.