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Israel's "Right to Exist"

Is it important that the Arabs acknowledge it?

The Israelis wanted the second phase of the Mideast Peace Conference to convene in the respective capitals of the involved parties. It seemed like a reasonable suggestion. After all, Jerusalem is only 150 miles from Damascus, Syria, and only 80 miles from Amman, Jordan. But the Arabs, did not accept that suggestion and insisted on a site as far away from home as possible. Why would they wish to impose such inconvenience on themselves? They believed that meeting with Israel in their respective capitals might by inference be considered as their recognition of Israel's existence.

What are the facts?

■ Despite decisive military defeats in the wars that they have launched against the Jewish state since the very day of its birth, the Arabs, in an almost unbelievable act of mental acrobatics, deny the existence of the country that has inflicted such severe and repeated punishment on them. When it becomes inevitable to mention the Jewish state it is referred to only as "the Zionist entity".

■ This non-acknowledgement of Israel's existence is not simply a matter of semantics. Arab maps do not show Israel, but a vast area, including Jordan, labeled as "Palestine". Cities such as Tel Aviv and Haifa simply don't exist. Arab school children, though imbued from earliest age with hatred of the Jews, have no "official" knowledge of the existence of Israel. They learn about it, one supposes, just as they learn about sex, by whispered comments in the schoolyard. Schedules of foreign airlines that show Israel on their route maps or that list Israeli destinations are not allowed in the countries. Foreign publications (among them, one regrets to report, such U.S. magazines as *Time* and *Newsweek*) print special editions for the Arab countries, since no publication carrying advertising of Israeli firms may appear in those countries. And, of course,

tourists of any nationality may not enter most Arab countries if their passports shows evidence that the holder has ever visited Israel, the "non-existent country". Not too many months ago, a U.S. Senator was barred from entering Saudi Arabia, our "faithful ally", because of an Israeli visa stamp that had been placed in his diplomatic passport.

■ As an inducement to Israel for yielding land that is absolutely indispensable for the country's defense, the Arabs now and then offer the possibility of the "recognition" of Israel's existence. The sad and almost incomprehensible aspect of that is that many well-meaning people in the U.S., in other countries, and, yes, even in Israel believe that this might be an acceptable bargain for Israel. But Israel's existence is in no way dependent on the recognition of any Arab state. It's simple: Israel exists because it exists. Therefore, supposing that any meaningful face-to-face meetings came about and if, say, a Syrian diplomat should ask Israel what it would be prepared to "give" if Syria would consider acknowledging Israel's existence, Israel should reply that Israel might in turn consider acknowledging Syria's existence. Or, Israel could declare a boycott of the Arab world and could offer to relax or to rescind such boycott in consideration of parallel gestures by the Arabs.

The bizarre concept of Israel's "non-existence" has been around for over forty years. Many good people, including quite a few in Israel itself, have been led to believe that Israel should bring substantial sacrifices, even to the point of imperiling its own security and survival, in order to get the Arabs to acknowledge Israel's existence. It is often said that Israel needs to be "recognized" by the Arabs in order to "normalize her condition". But need not the Arabs, too, live in "normalized conditions"? And Israel is often promised that, in return for yielding vital strategic territory to the Arabs, she would be assured of "safe and secure borders". But don't the Arabs also need borders that are safe and secure? The Arab countries and much of the world have come to believe that peace is only good and desirable for Israel. But it is surely at least as important for the Arabs, who have lived through and have been bloodily defeated in five wars with Israel - the "non-existent country". Peace and prosperity can and will come to this troubled region only when the Arabs accept the reality of Israel's existence and negotiate with her openly and in good faith.

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