

Is There a Peace Partner in Israel?

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The path Abbas opted to take was not an easy one, especially given that it came in the aftermath of the Second Intifada with its many casualties and damage to Palestinian infrastructure, society and lives. [File photo of a clash between Palestinian protestors and security forces in the occupied West Bank]

The peace process between the Palestinians and the Israelis is at a complete standstill and each party blames the other for the failure to make any progress. Israeli officials repeat continuously that there is no Palestinian peace partner and accuse Abbas and his Palestinian Authority of flexing their diplomatic muscles in an attempt to isolate Israel internationally and take unilateral steps to achieve statehood. However, it would be outlandish to imagine that the Palestinians could succeed in such an approach (if it is true) without a minimum international understanding of the Palestinian narrative. In order to fully comprehend this state of affairs, it is crucial to make an assessment of the positions and announcements of both sides.

Since he took office as PA president in 2005, Mahmoud Abbas has renounced violence and announced repeatedly his vision: a peaceful resolution of the conflict that would eventually lead to an independent Palestinian state. His vision complies perfectly with the widely-accepted and supported two-state solution based on relevant international and UN resolutions.

The path Abbas opted to take was not an easy one, especially given that it came in the aftermath of the Second Intifada with its many casualties and damage to Palestinian infrastructure, society and lives. Notwithstanding the fact that domestic Palestinian conditions were not ready for such an approach, Abbas stated it clearly and irked many of his companions and political rivals.

"We don't want to use force," the PA president insisted. "We don't want to use weapons. We want to use diplomacy. We want to use politics. We want to use negotiations. We want to use peaceful resistance. That's it."¹ Furthermore, Abbas dared to criticise home-made rockets launched from the Gaza Strip. His criticism was neither to please Israel nor to satisfy the Americans, but rather it came out of his conscience and deep belief in a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

As part of his commitment to peace, and despite the criticism, Abbas disarmed Palestinian groups in the West Bank and united the Palestinian Security Forces (a mainly policing service and not a regular army) under his direct command. Ever since, not one single violation was recorded as being committed by those forces. Indeed, while many Jewish settlers carried out attacks on Palestinian citizens and their property, the Palestinian forces handed those caught to the Israeli authorities unharmed; this led to criticism of Abbas and

his forces by his political rivals.

Arafat, Abbas and the Palestinian leadership have all at one time or another announced their acceptance of the two-state solution and the recognition of the State of Israel. Abbas's last announcement came on 24 November calling on the international community to compel Israel to comply with its legal obligations regarding international resolutions, saying that he is ready to set up a Palestinian state on only 22 per cent of historic Palestine. That said, half of the Palestinian population who live within historic Palestine actually live in what is now Israel occupying 78 per cent of the land; the other half would be in the State of Palestine on 22 per cent of the territory.

Peace talks between the Palestinians and the Israelis have been ongoing since 1991, during which period Israeli settlement activities have quadrupled within the occupied Palestinian territories. This being the case, the Palestinians have asked for a time frame for negotiations, which can't last forever while Israel runs about changing facts on the ground. It is as a result of Israel's refusal to accept the time frame and halt its settlement activities that weary Palestinians are seeking justice through international forums and agencies, primarily the UN.

Although Israel is supposed to have accepted the two-state solution, and signed the Oslo Accords in 1993, none of the subsequent Israeli governments has, thus far, recognised the State of Palestine. Israel recognised the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) as the sole representative of the Palestinian people but still refuses to recognise the state.

In fact, many Israeli officials have openly expressed their rejection of a Palestinian state. Most of the parties taking part in the Israeli General Election campaign have done likewise. The incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has never missed an opportunity to voice what he believes is Israel's inherent right to the whole of the Biblical land of Israel, undermining any prospects of the establishment of a Palestinian state, at least in the minds of his target audience amongst the settlers.

Activists and politicians can express their opinions openly, but once they are part of a government that is involved in peace talks, it is fair to say that such opinions will reflect government policies. Just a few days ago, Netanyahu's economic minister, Naftali Bennett, was asked by CNN if he "does not want a Palestinian State ever". His answer was very clear: "That's correct; the notion of injecting a state, dividing Jerusalem, dividing up the country and splitting and slicing it, is not sustainable."²

Israel's UN Ambassador Ron Prosor spent 25 November attacking the European parliaments who were voting on the recognition of Palestine. He rejected the very idea of handing the Palestinians their independence. "Imagine the type of state [Palestinian] society would produce," he said. "Does the Middle East really need another terror-ocracy? Some members of the international community are aiding and abetting its creation."³

There are plenty of similar examples, the starkest of which is perhaps that of Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman. He exposed the real essence of the peace process when he said that it is based on the false assumption that the conflict is territorial and not ideological, and that the establishment of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders will end it.⁴ To add insult to injury, Lieberman is not shy about expressing his intentions to "transfer" Arab-

Israeli citizens, Christians and Muslims, out of the country in order to make it a purely Jewish state.⁵

At the time when Abbas has been standing firm in the face of strong domestic criticism, Israel's leadership has failed to give peace a glimmer of hope. The Israeli government continues to give the go-ahead to plans for new settlement units and expand existing ones despite US and international criticism. When Israel halted settlement activities for nine months, it added a precondition to any peace settlement: the recognition of Israel as a Jewish state.

Intriguingly, the inclusion of this condition as a prerequisite to peace was first brought up in 2010 in Washington, but it puzzles many observers. In his article "Did Netanyahu invent the demand that Israel be recognised as a Jewish State?" Yair Rosenberg finds that Netanyahu was insisting on such recognition in the full knowledge that no Palestinian leader will accept it, thus dooming negotiations to failure.⁶

On the whole, Netanyahu's government has lost credibility. The international community has started to realise this and the overdue "moral" recognition of the "occupied" State of Palestine by European parliaments represents a clear shift away from America's position. With the latter's "hands-off" approach, Netanyahu has arguably been able to crack the whip over the US administration, which limited its role in the peace process to calls, ideas and proposals; it has failed to put pressure on Israel to freeze its internationally-criticised, illegal settlement activities, and maintains its "pro-Israel" bias.

It is neither illogical nor bizarre to see any country which accepts the two-state solution also recognising the nascent State of Palestine, because this equation clearly suggests that two states have to exist, even if one is under occupation. On this basis alone, recognition by the US or Israel would provide solid evidence of a sincere commitment to the peace process.

In short, it is clear that there is no partner for peace within Israel. The actions of the current Israeli government serve only to spread doubt about the whole process. In fact, serious political will is lacking in Israel and its government has failed the basic tests to determine any commitment towards peace and the end of the occupation of the land of Palestine. A corollary of the Netanyahu government's attitude posits that it would be hard to staunch the flow of international interaction and recognition. This may develop further so that governments which recognise the State of Palestine also boycott Israel, just as many boycotted Apartheid South Africa.

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<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/11/01/palestinians-israel-abbas-refugees-idUSL5E8M1GO120121101>

2

<http://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2014/12/14/israeli-econ-minister-i-will-not-give-up-land-to-arabs-anymore/>

³ <http://972mag.com/israels-ambassador-to-the-un-puts-another-nail-in-the-two-state-coffin/99201/>

⁴ <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3338320,00.html>

⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/25/transfer-arab-israeli-citizens-palestinian-state>

⁶ <http://tabletmag.com/scroll/160131/did-netanyahu-invent-the-demand-that-israel-be-recognized-as-a-jewish-state>

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