

Netanyahu and the 'Future of the Peace Process'

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It seems that the Palestinian-Israeli 'peace process' is in serious jeopardy. At least, this is the immediate impression one gleans from media reports from Israel. Unlike, Israel's Kadima and Labor party 'moderates', Prime Minister-designate Benjamin Netanyahu is largely considered to be a possible impairment to the negotiations aimed at facilitating a two-state solution. The media story, however, is riddled with misconceptions and dotted with false assumptions.

While Netanyahu is indeed a rightwing ideologue, he hardly differs, regarding issues pertinent to the peace process, from his predecessors. More, one fails to appreciate the risks facing the peace process, considering that there is no such process. Israel continues with its military onslaughts and illegal settlement expansion unabated, and the Palestinian Authority of Mahmoud Abbas continues with what seems as its top political priorities: isolating Hamas in Gaza and maintaining its reign in the West Bank.

So to just what 'peace process' is the media referring? What prospects - for a viable two-state solution - are still passionately discussed? One earnestly fails to understand.

Equally confusing is the fact that some western leaders and diplomats maintain a wait-and-see position, hoping that Netanyahu will respect and maintain the peace process - which doesn't exist - as did the Israeli peacemakers before him...who also didn't exist.

In precarious comments made to The National, Tony Blair, now the envoy of the UN's Middle East quartet and the former British Prime Minister, assured that Netanyahu had indicated his support 'in principle' to the two-state solution, contrary, of course, to Netanyahu's own assertions. "When asked whether Netanyahu was supportive of a Palestinian state," the newspaper reported, "Blair said: 'He has always made that clear to me.'"

Such rhetoric, if augmented, could lead to another political ruse, similar to that maintained by Netanyahu during his few years as Israel's prime minister starting in May 1996.

Then, new Likud leader Netanyahu narrowly defeated Shimon Peres in Israeli elections, and had strategically positioned himself as the Israeli leader who would bring an end to the 'concessions' made by his rivals in the Labor party. He also maintained a different façade before Western media as a peacemaker.

It has to be said that the average Palestinian can almost never spot the difference between that of a rightwing Likud government, 'leftwing' Labor government, or a center-right Kadima. What Palestinians continue to see are soldiers and tanks, checkpoints, bulldozers, barbed wire, land confiscation orders and the same symbols of occupation and domination that never seem to change regardless of the ideological background or political leanings of

those who rule Israel.

Shortly after his inauguration, Netanyahu came under American pressure to implement long-delayed Oslo deadlines, presenting the then inexperienced leader with a major predicament. On one hand, he wished not to raise the ire of the US, which invested much time and resources in Oslo, and on the other, he wanted to impede any possibility of revival of the accords. Thus he did what most Israeli leaders would be expected to do under such dilemmas. He provoked violence. In September 1996, Netanyahu ordered the opening of a tunnel that ran underneath one of Islam's holiest shrines, the Al-Aqsa Mosque, further threatening the already devastated foundation of the sacred place. His act achieved its very purpose, for it ignited fury among Palestinians in the occupied territories. Several days of clashes resulted in the death and wounding of many, mostly Palestinians. The Israeli government used the incident to underscore Oslo's failure to meet Israel's security needs.

While Arafat's security forces launched arrest campaigns in the West Bank and Gaza - in an attempt to satisfy Netanyahu's demands - The Israeli leader continued settlement expansion and confiscation of Palestinian land. More on October 28, he approved the construction of thousands of new units in existing settlements and, later, the fortification of 33 settlements and construction of 13 new Jewish-only bypass roads.

Yet, in Israel, Netanyahu, despite all of his moves, failed to satisfy his constituency, and on May 17, 1999, the leader of the Labor Party, Ehud Barak was elected. Subsequently, Netanyahu resigned from the Likud leadership.

It's vital to note that Barak's advent renewed, once again the peace rhetoric, despite the fact that the new 'dove' gave little indication of his willingness to meet the 'painful concessions' required in the final status talks.

As then US president Bill Clinton propped up Barak as the Israeli leader who is most capable of delivering peace, ordinary Palestinians had little expectations, and not least because of Barak's own bloody history. In his victory speech, Barak delineated his peace 'vision' to cheering Israelis: "I tell you that the time for peace has come - not peace through weakness, but peace through might and a sense of security; not peace at the expense of security but peace that will bring security. We will move quickly toward separation from the Palestinians within four security red lines: a united Jerusalem under our sovereignty as the capital of Israel for eternity, period; under no conditions will we return to the 1967 borders; no foreign army west of the Jordan River; and most of the settlers in Judaea and Samaria will be in settlement blocs under our sovereignty."

Overlook the names and the titles, most Israeli major party leaders are one and the same; even their language is equally archaic and confrontational. Therefore, one fails to appreciate the panic over the 'future of the peace process.' As far as Gaza, for example, is concerned, it matters little whether the over 1400 people killed in 22 days were blown up by a Likud Revisionist, pulverized by a Labor dove, or bombed by a Kadima peacemaker, a fact that an envoy like Blair doesn't seem to understand.

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