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Encountering Peace: Get real, get down

BY GERSHON BASKIN
02/02/2010 00:40

Israel and the Palestinians are quite aware of each other's red lines.

Talkbacks (13)

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After almost a year in office, Binyamin Netanyahu enjoys remarkably high public support. Under his leadership, the country seems to have come out rather well from the global economic crisis, most citizens feel quite secure and the government is talking peace. The public seems convinced that Netanyahu is sincere in his desire to seek negotiations with the Palestinians.

Netanyahu began his strategic campaign for peace from the very beginning of his term. In his inaugural speech in the Knesset on March 31, 2009, he clearly stated: "Today more than ever, Israel strives to achieve full peace with the Arab and Muslim world... My government will act vis-à-vis the Palestinian Authority to achieve peace on three parallel tracks: economic, security and political."

And who can forget his famous Bar-Ilan speech, in which he said, "I say to the Palestinians: We want to live with you in peace, quiet and good neighborly relations... In my vision of peace, there are two free peoples living side by side in this small land..."

Until now, we have depended on the US to set the path and the pace of a renewed peace process. It seems evident that President Barack Obama underestimated the difficulties entailed, and his emissary Senator George Mitchell has failed to bring the parties to the table. To some this may come as a relief – it doesn't look like there will be real US pressure on Israel to do anything. In fact, it appears that Obama has adopted the strategy suggested by *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman in his November 9, 2009 piece "Call White House, Ask for Barack" in which he suggested to the president: "Let's just get out of the picture. Let all these leaders stand in front of their own people and tell them the truth: 'My fellow citizens: Nothing is happening; nothing is going to happen. It's just you and me and the problem we own... If the status quo is this tolerable for the parties, then I say, let them enjoy it.'"

Friedman played golf with Obama a week before publishing this piece.

Is the status quo tolerable, as Friedman suggests? For the Palestinians it is unbearably intolerable. While the Palestinian public does not want another round of violence and is enjoying a period of relative calm and economic growth, the status quo is not sustainable, and in the absence of political progress, the situation will explode once again.

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For Israel there is a sense of living in a bubble – there is security, there is economic growth. Even if the international community is strongly against the occupation policies, the real threat of a nuclear Iran helps deflect some of the criticism and the global movement advocating BDS – boycott, divestment and sanctions – is gaining only marginal support.

BUT ADVANCING Israeli-Palestinian peace is not just a Palestinian interest. Netanyahu would not have emphasized it so boldly in his inaugural speech, or in his Bar-Ilan speech or in almost every address he gives. Even Netanyahu knows that the real interest is not in getting to the negotiating table, but in concluding a full peace agreement that will bring full Palestinian recognition of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, and real long-term security through the development of mutual interests based on neighborly relations.

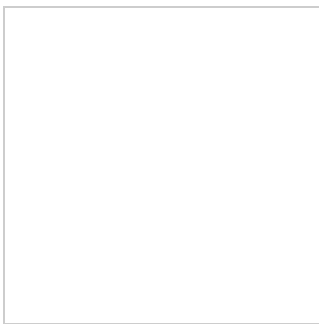
Netanyahu must understand that the Palestinians will never accept less than what former prime minister Ehud Olmert offered. There is no compelling reason for them to even return to the negotiating table unless Netanyahu is willing to begin from where Olmert left off. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas did not reject Olmert's offer – the negotiations did not reach a point of finality in their own right. Olmert's term ended with his resignation, and he has stated that with a few more weeks he could have reached an agreement with Abbas. Olmert believes that Abbas is a partner, and according to what Olmert has reported in private interviews, the main points of difference, or the gaps as Abbas called them, related to territorial issues and not to Jerusalem or refugees.

Since the peace process is so central to Netanyahu's worldview, he and his inner cabinet need to devote some quality time to unravelling the quagmire of how a viable Palestinian state can be established while sticking to positions that not only appear in all the speeches but in actual policies. These include: Jerusalem remains united under Israel sovereignty with new Jewish neighborhoods in the center of Palestinian areas in Jebel Mukaber, Silwan, Sheikh Jarrah and more. Ma'aleh Adumim and the E-1 area connecting it to Jerusalem will be developed as part of Israel. Ariel and the 20 kilometers of territory inside the West Bank leading to it stay forever a part of Israel, as well as Gush Etzion and all the other settlements included in the strategic map. How can this be reconciled with the establishment of a Palestinian state?

If Netanyahu were really serious about peace, he wouldn't need Mitchell to convene negotiations. If the government really wanted to make peace with the Palestinians it would put down a realistic offer that they could not refuse, and they would make it public.

SEVENTEEN YEARS after the Oslo process began, Netanyahu and his cabinet are quite aware of the Palestinian red lines. They know what would be an acceptable formula for reaching a peace agreement. Rather than continuing the charade of trying to convince someone that Israel is interested in negotiations, it would be more honest to put our cards on the table: The demands of this government and those of the Palestinian people are irreconcilable.

The same thing can be said of the Palestinians. Since Abbas agrees that Olmert's offer was very close to their demands and needs, rather than fostering the charade on their side about wanting to negotiate, it is time for them to put forth their own proposal, knowing full well what the Israeli public would live with. If the Israeli government and the Palestinian government really want to achieve peace, as they claim, they would be honest with their publics and put on paper their vision of the peace agreement that the other side could accept – not their maximalist opening negotiating positions, but their realistic peace offer.



Since it seems that we cannot depend on the international community to guide us to the shores of peace, the leaders of Israel and Palestine should stop dragging their feet and present a serious plan to their people. There is no reason for one side to wait for the other to take the first step. If both sides are as serious in action as their speeches imply, negotiations will actually have a chance of reaching agreement

The writer is co-CEO of the Israel-Palestine Center for Research and Information (www.ipcri.org), and an elected member of the Leadership of the Green Movement political party.

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