

# Israel and the Peace Process:

## An Observer's View

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### Brief Analysis

**N**etanyahu as politician: When asked about himself, Netanyahu replies that he is neither Shimon Peres nor Yitzhak Shamir. Indeed, Netanyahu is not the ideologue some think he is: he has met with Arafat, he never speaks of "Greater Israel" and by agreeing to the Hebron Accord of January 1997, he gave his assent to a process whereby 36 percent of the West Bank has moved under Palestinian control (Zones A and B). Netanyahu is a man of another generation, not driven by an ideological or moral imperative, but a political one.

In contrast to Yitzhak Rabin, who saw a narrow "window of opportunity" for Israel to make peace with the "inner ring" of Arab states in order to forge a common front to face the "outer ring" of rogue states, Netanyahu does not feel a sense of urgency about the peace process. That is because he does not see the likelihood of nearby states contributing to Israel's security and does not believe that Israel should divest itself of critical territory in order to gain benefits of questionable value. Israel's defense establishment, however, is concerned about the price of inaction, fearing that this will bring violence and bloodshed. Netanyahu wants to hang tough and force the Palestinians, and other Arabs, to change their mindset, or as the Hebrew phrase goes, to force them "to change the diskette." Netanyahu would argue that he is succeeding, citing the parallelism in the new U.S. plan regarding reciprocal actions on the part of the Palestinians and Israelis.

Focusing on terrorism is a "no-lose policy" for Netanyahu. In a period of little terrorism, Netanyahu takes credit for the calm; when terrorism heats up, he cites it as a reason to get tough with the Palestinian Authority or withhold concessions. If Chairman Yasser Arafat were seen as vigilant on terrorism, this would undercut Netanyahu's approach. The fact that Arafat's own commitment to fighting terrorism is, at best, ambiguous, gives Netanyahu wide latitude on the issue.

U.S. pressure on Israel: The tension in the U.S.-Israel relationship today is reminiscent of the loan guarantees fight of 1991-1992. At the time, Prime Minister Shamir refused to accept onerous conditions on the \$10 billion dollar loan guarantee offer by the U.S. that was intended to help absorb new immigrants. These new immigrant voters threw him out for preferring settlement construction over the money. Today, however, there are two key differences:

- There is no comparable carrot that Washington is offering Israel to offset a peace process concession; and

- Today's issue is security (how much land can Israel afford to give to Palestinians) not the ideological issue of settlements.

These differences give the Likud government of 1998 an advantage that the Shamir government of 1992 did not have.

Within Netanyahu's Knesset coalition, there are eighteen members of the Land of Israel Front, who are opposed to the concessions outlined by the U.S. plan. Only four of them would have to carry through on their threats to bolt from the coalition in order to bring down the government, as the extreme right did to Shamir in 1992. It seems doubtful, therefore, that Netanyahu will accept the current U.S. initiative.

Jerusalem and Washington: Netanyahu has two main arguments against the U.S. plan: security and precedent. Regardless of what percentage the United States puts forward for its view of a "credible and significant" Israeli redeployment, the Clinton administration will be cast in the role of second guessing Israeli security concerns. Netanyahu also opposes the precedent of the United States drawing any lines on a map and offering it as an official U.S. view, which could be dangerous going into final status talks. Here however, it is important to keep in mind that Netanyahu himself is responsible for expanding the U.S. role in the negotiations, having asked Washington to assume a larger role in the peace process in the context of the Hebron talks in late 1996 and early 1997. Also, he has publicly requested that the President convene a Camp David summit with Arafat, which suggests heavy U.S. mediation.

The lack of trust between Arafat and Netanyahu derives from a lack of understanding of where their negotiations are ultimately headed. In light of this, U.S. involvement is crucial. Washington can play a vital role in preventing a total breakdown of the process in May 1999, when negotiations concerning a final status agreement between the two sides are supposed to be concluded. In the absence of a final status accord, the two parties are likely to resort to unilateral action to achieve their political goals. Some Likud members feel this would facilitate movement on issues which cannot be settled in final status talks. However, this is a dangerous gamble that could result in widespread violence.

Ideas for Progress: Adding two concepts to the package of proposals now on the table would make the current U.S. initiative much more attractive to the Israelis. These include:

- Irreversible for irreversible. While Israel is being asked to withdraw, irrevocably, from West Bank territory, there is fear that any new PA commitments to end the "revolving door" whereby terrorists are jailed and shortly thereafter, set free. Implementing a system of surprise challenge inspections of PA prisons could satisfy these concerns. Another possible solution could be extradition of terrorists to a third country.
- New Music. For peace to take root, it is important to hear a real message of reconciliation from Arafat and Netanyahu. Both speak differently to Americans and Europeans than they do to their own constituencies; this is especially the case with Arafat, who regularly countenances incitement, but it is also true for Netanyahu.

Lebanon: Resolving the Lebanon morass would be a great victory for Netanyahu, given the deadlock with the Palestinians and the growing political pressure from mothers who do not want their sons to serve in Lebanon. Plus, Lebanon does not have the ideological significance of the West Bank nor the strategic importance of the Golan. The main obstacle is Syria. It would be difficult for Syria to justify having troops in Lebanon if the Israelis are not in the south. In addition, an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon would undermine Syria's leverage in negotiating for the Golan Heights. The perverse irony of Lebanon is that the largest obstacle to Israeli withdrawal from an Arab country is another Arab country.

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