

How Netanyahu Could Surprise Us Again

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Jun 2, 2016

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The heated criticism of his government's rightward shift is obscuring the fact that Arab officials continue to work with Israel on various important initiatives, creating room for potential diplomatic developments that could render outside peacemaking forays moot.

International reaction has been fast, and mostly furious, to Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu's surprise decision last week to broaden his governing coalition -- not with Isaac Herzog's "dovish" party, but with Avigdor Liberman's "hawkish" one. Tom Friedman of the *New York Times* sharply captured this conventional wisdom, lamenting Netanyahu's turnabout as the end of the "peace process" and the beginning of a new, eternally strife-torn single state of "Israel-Palestine."

Internal Israeli reactions have likewise been largely negative, focusing more on Liberman's unceremonious replacement of the relatively moderate defense minister, Moshe Yaalon. Even venerable hawks like Moshe Arens, Israel's defense minister under mainly right-wing governments in the 1980s, have very vocally sided with Yaalon against Liberman. And personally I, too, much prefer the former figure to the latter one, and even more strongly prefer a relatively centrist Israeli government to a very narrow, right-wing, religious one.

But one crucial factor is missing from this narrative: Arab reaction, or the lack thereof, to Netanyahu's latest political maneuver. The Palestinians, to be sure, did react with strong rhetoric: Hamas with its typical mixture of dismissiveness, boastfulness, and bellicosity; the Palestinian Authority with its usual, more reasonable accusations against Israel's "intransigence." Yet less predictably, Egypt is continuing to host high-level Israeli delegations. Jordan has just invited Israel to contribute to its new national investment fund. Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal, no longer in government but almost certainly operating with official acquiescence, continues to meet publicly with senior Israeli counterparts. And just outside

the Arab orbit, Turkey continues to work very openly on repairing relations with Israel, nearly frozen ever since the severe setback of the 2010 *Mavi Marmara* episode.

What accounts for this apparent official willingness to ignore Liberman's new appointment and keep dealing quite cordially with Israel? Partly it is that these days the Arabs' and Turks' primary preoccupation is not Israel's occupation, but their own acute internal and external problems, from civil strife to Syria to Iran. And partly also, on a more positive note, those problems are pushing some Arabs to think harder about reviving the long-dormant Arab Peace Initiative toward Israel, regardless of the details of its fractious domestic politics. Significantly, Tony Blair, fresh from his open disappointment with the failure to bring Herzog into Israel's cabinet, nevertheless reiterated his view -- after Liberman's return to power -- that the Arabs are now ready to move toward peace with Israel in stages. In other words, even before final resolution of the Palestinian issue.

Moreover, Liberman is on record as appreciating the Arab Peace Initiative. To be sure, as the pundits never cease pointing out, he is also on record with recklessly aggressive comments about Arabs, whether in Egypt, Gaza, the West Bank, or even inside Israel. Yet Liberman has previously spoken out in firm support, unlike several of his erstwhile cabinet colleagues, of Secretary of State John Kerry's peacemaking efforts. And he has even declared that, in exchange for real peace, he would personally be willing to evacuate his home in the West Bank settlement of Nokdim.

The preceding analysis was written a full week before Liberman's formal appointment ceremony on Monday, May 30. Sure enough, at that event he reiterated his favorable view of the Arab Peace Initiative. Even more to the point, that view was endorsed for the first time by Netanyahu as well -- along with his renewed support for a "two-state solution" to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In fact, both Liberman and Netanyahu are now players in another, still more paradoxical diplomatic dynamic at work today. Some Arabs and Israelis are trying to find their own way forward, precisely because they fear the inadequate or bumbling efforts of outsiders to do the job. The biggest historical breakthroughs in Arab-Israeli peacemaking were achieved precisely in this ironic fashion. In 1977, Sadat went to Jerusalem because he and Begin had both despaired of the abortive U.S.-Soviet attempts to convene a Geneva conference aimed at a "comprehensive" regional peace. Instead, the two leaders cooked up a fateful, and successful, bilateral deal of their own.

Similarly, at Oslo in 1993, PLO and Israeli negotiators secretly found a way around the fruitless talks underway in Washington with local Palestinian leaders. And in both cases, the parties agreed to take major positive steps -- but without trying to resolve all Arab-Israeli issues at once, as well-meaning but feckless foreigners are too often wont to employ.

Something like this may be happening again right now. The U.S. government is marking time at least until our election is over -- but publicly musing about a speech, or perhaps a UN Security Council resolution, toward the end of the year. Neither option holds any real promise of practical success; and both Arabs and Israelis, for different reasons, are highly skeptical about either option. The French government is currently orchestrating the curious spectacle of a preparatory Palestinian-Israeli peace conference, due to convene in Paris June 3 -- but, remarkably, without the attendance of either party to the conflict. Even some French diplomats privately admit this has more to do with French domestic politics than with any serious diplomatic prospects. And the Quartet (the United States, Russia, the EU, and the UN) is supposed to issue another report on the problem soon afterward. That, too, is almost surely destined to be the latest in a long line of soon-to-be-dusty mere pieces of paper.

Faced with these inauspicious international initiatives, is it any wonder that the Egyptian government is now reported to be

contemplating an Arab-Israeli "summit" of some kind in Cairo, perhaps even without any Palestinians present? And why wouldn't that be a good idea, if only to get constructive regional discussions started? The point is, we should all pay less attention to Liberman and more to the underlying tectonic shifts in the region that both he and the Arabs, the Kurds, the Turks, and the Iranians all are doomed to inhabit.

Of course, the United States should not (and probably could not) adopt a strategy of deliberately doing "stupid stuff," in President Obama's memorable phrase, in order to drive Arabs and Israelis to come up with smarter solutions on their own. The risks, not to mention the embarrassment, are too high to be worthwhile. But don't be too surprised if Netanyahu now suddenly veers toward some kind of peace initiative -- and gets a willing Arab response. For the time being, to be sure, he has chosen to avoid any public concessions on the issue of West Bank settlements. Nevertheless, his remarks Monday evening demonstrate a clear desire to work around that problem in the search for a new Arab-Israeli dialogue.

Is all this wishful thinking? Sadly, probably so, because so many moving parts would have to align for it to work. Yet it roughly corresponds to the manifest wishes of both Israel and key Arab governments. And once in a great while, even in the Middle East, wishes really do come true.

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