

Patience, Not Panic, on Israeli-Palestinian Peace

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A successful peace process will require renewed faith in the U.S.-Israel alliance, America's regional leadership, and the utility of incremental Israeli-Palestinian gains.

It has become conventional wisdom in the United States and Europe that Israeli politics is shifting rightward. This in turn fuels a view that only tough love from Washington and European capitals -- in the form of a dictated peace plan or other such ultimatum -- can salvage any hope for Israeli-Palestinian peace, and ultimately secure Israel's own survival. Both the analysis and policy advice are flawed, and if heeded by the Obama administration would further undermine prospects for peace and security in the Middle East.

It is incontrovertible that the list chosen by Likud voters in their recent primary -- which includes hardliners such as Moshe Feiglin -- represents a sharp move to the right for the party. It is also correct that a recent poll by Israel's Dahaf Institute indicates that the Jewish Home-National Union party, which is to Likud's right, stands to more than double its representation in the Knesset, taking seats from Likud and its electoral partner, the secular-right Israel Beitenu party.

What is noted less often, however, is that left-wing parties have also gained. The same poll shows gains not just for the Labor party, but for the far-left Meretz party as well as social-justice-focused Yesh Atid (which did not previously exist), as well as for Tzipi Livni's "Movement" party. The losers are the Likud-Israel Beitenu coalition, projected to lose nine seats, and the centrist parties -- Kadima, which had twenty-one seats but will cease to exist, and Ehud Barak's "Independence" party, which will not field candidates with his retirement from the Knesset.

Despite this shifting within both the left and the right, the polls indicate an absence of movement between the two poles. The result, rather startlingly, is that despite the churn, the right-left balance is forecast to remain precisely as it currently stands. The data projects not a more right-wing Knesset, but a more polarized one. It also projects a weaker position for Prime Minister Netanyahu in coalition politics, which could well mean a more right-wing government than that he currently heads, though -- depending on what deals he is able to cut -- this is hardly a

foregone conclusion.

More important for U.S. policymakers is what such election results would reveal about Israeli voters. Analysts who fret that the Israeli election will diminish prospects for peace have confused cause and effect. Heightened security worries sparked by Iran and the upheaval in the Arab world, compounded by fading hopes for peace with the Palestinians after four years of backsliding in the peace process, have fueled the electoral shifts that will be manifest in the Jan. 22 results.

A separate Dahaf poll from December 2012 indicates that Israelis increasingly believe that concessions will not bring real peace. Eighty-three percent did not believe that even a full Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 lines would bring an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and seventy-five percent felt that the Palestinian Authority could not be relied upon to fulfill its obligations. This figure is up from sixty-four percent just a year ago, a sign of how the PA's unilateralism at the United Nations has shaken Israeli confidence in its negotiating counterpart.

This pessimism about peace has undoubtedly fueled a view that "defensible borders," not a peace agreement, is the surest route to actually achieving peace. Sixty-one percent of Israelis express that view, compared to forty-nine percent who did so in 2005. It is also surely deepened by growing anxiety about developments in the Arab world -- forty-one percent of Israelis said these made peace with the Palestinians less likely, up from thirty-two percent just one year ago. Israelis are also fixated on the threat posed by Iran -- fifty-three percent support an Israeli attack on Iran, even though just twenty-one percent believe that such an attack will succeed in eliminating an Iranian nuclear threat.

It is this deep and abiding anxiety over security which drives voters to right-wing parties, whose supporters tend to identify security policy as their number-one concern. Those voters who support leftist parties do not tend to do so because they also prioritize security but believe the left has a better approach to achieving it; they do so because they overwhelmingly identify economic and social issues, rather than security, as their top priority.

Buried in all of this data is hope for the United States. The political polarization in Israel does not necessarily indicate, as casual analysis has sometimes suggested, polarization over security issues. If anything, the Israeli public is a lot like the American public -- quite concerned about the security challenges emanating from the Middle East, but unsure what to do about them. They are also pragmatic, however, and clearly desire peace. The Dahaf poll shows an even split on dismantling settlements outside the major blocs, and clear support for a restrained Israeli response to the Palestinian statehood bid at the UN. And other polls continue to show strong support for a negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict -- despite despair that one will ever be achieved.

This deep -- if flickering -- desire for peace is an opportunity for the Obama administration, and the data also point to a policy path for seizing it. That path must begin with a return to basics. The U.S. must first restore the health of the U.S.-Israel alliance. The Dahaf poll suggests that only thirty-nine percent of Israelis believe the United States can be counted upon to support Israel.

Washington must also convince Israelis that it is determined to tackle the threats which so preoccupy both our populations, from the chaos in Syria to Iran's nuclear ambitions. Right now, only thirty-nine percent of Israelis believe that they can rely upon the United States to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Finally, the U.S. must seek to restore some measure of faith between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority. This will require small steps focused on issues where joint Israeli-Palestinian gains are possible, rather than the grand gestures to which American and European officials have sometimes succumbed in the past. The collapse of confidence between the two sides began with the December 2008 Gaza war, but was compounded by American diplomatic errors, such as the Obama administration's focus on a total settlement freeze. Settlements are a deeply difficult issue, but not the obstacle to negotiations they have lately been made out to be. It has been largely

forgotten that the Annapolis Conference in November 2007 was immediately followed by a crisis attending the announcement of construction in Har Homa. That crisis was overcome, and the negotiations proceeded a few weeks later.

These three elements -- the U.S.-Israel alliance, U.S. leadership in the region, and a certain faith in one another between the two sides -- constitute the pillars upon which any successful peace process must rest. As he approaches the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in his second term, President Obama must avoid desperation in either of its primary modes -- hail-Mary peace plans or glum inaction. It is never a bad time to push for peace; but making progress will require patient preparation, followed by consistent, unflinching, and unglamorous work.

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