

Barak's Win Puts Pressure on Arafat

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After three years of a foreign policy that found Israel increasingly isolated, Ehud Barak's landslide victory in Israel's elections Monday should inaugurate a new "era of good feelings" between Israelis, Americans and Arabs. But once the honeymoon wears off, Israel's negotiating partners shouldn't expect Mr. Barak to make substantive concessions in the "peace process." Mr. Barak's vision of peace will differ from Mr. Netanyahu's only on the margins -- and the new prime minister, with greater personal credibility and political support than his predecessor enjoyed, will be a more effective exponent of Israel's position.

Both men reflect an Israeli consensus on trading land for peace with the Palestinians but not compromising Israeli security in the process. Washington will have to come to grips with the reality that Israel's policy will require greater concessions from Yasser Arafat than the U.S. has so far asked him to contemplate.

Ironically, Mr. Netanyahu was undone by his greatest "achievement." Through his acquiescence to the Oslo accords in 1996 and the Hebron agreement in 1997 and his negotiation of the Wye River Memorandum in 1998, Mr. Netanyahu tried to steer a middle course between the "Greater Israel" ideology of the right (which opposed giving up any land) and the starry-eyed ideology of the left (which sought only loose security guarantees in return for giving up land).

In the process, he wound up destroying his own governing coalition. His Likud Party won just 19 seats out of 120 in the Knesset. The National Religious Party, tribune of West Bank settlers, appears to have lost four of its nine seats, and the far-right National Union coalition -- the only party to oppose adamantly all agreements with the Palestinians -- won only three. In contrast, the hard-core left -- the Meretz party and the three Arab parties -- together garnered nearly one-sixth of the overall vote.

It was a cruel irony for Mr. Netanyahu that when he tried to replay his 1996 campaign by raising fears of impending Labor-left concessions to the Palestinians, the public yawned. Though the Clinton administration would contend that he had failed as peacemaker, Mr. Netanyahu had succeeded -- at least among Israelis -- too well for his own good. With the peace process largely neutralized as a campaign issue, Mr. Barak benefited from a media focus on Mr. Netanyahu's personal foibles and failures. For many traditional Likudniks, the absence of ideological struggle made a once-unthinkable vote for the Labor candidate suddenly palatable.

Mr. Barak's task now is to pursue full reciprocal implementation of the Wye Accords and to proceed with "final status

negotiations" with the Palestinians. Thanks in part to Mr. Netanyahu's efforts, Mr. Barak inherits a country that is substantially united on the peace effort. A firm 80% of Israeli voters support a final peace deal with the Palestinians that may include the establishment of a Palestinian ministate with limited sovereignty. By the same margin, Israeli voters rule out withdrawal to the country's 1967 borders (which would mean giving up all of the Gaza Strip and West Bank), reject any division of Jerusalem, and refuse to countenance any right of return" to Israel for Palestinian refugees. Left, right and center may differ (at times sharply) on the details but, post-Netanyahu, these are disagreements in degree, not in kind.

The combination of Mr. Barak's landslide victory and Israel's consensus on peacemaking are not necessarily good news for Mr. Arafat. Though the atmospherics of Israeli-Palestinian relations will change under Mr. Barak -- more ego massaging, fewer surprises -- the underlying obstacles to a final settlement will not change, at least not as long as Mr. Barak remains true to his platform. Indeed, his ascendance will only expose the yawning chasm that separates the Israeli consensus from the Palestinian demands for every inch of the West Bank and Gaza and a chunk of Jerusalem too.

This should prompt the Clinton administration to shift its approach. The White House has been extremely solicitous of Palestinian concerns, going so far as to promise Mr. Arafat virtual statehood. In return, all the administration asked, ever so politely, was for Mr. Arafat not to issue a unilateral declaration of independence. All the while, Washington turned a blind eye as the Palestinians won support in Europe and at the United Nations Humans Rights Commission for reaffirming 50-year old U.N. resolutions that call for Israel to be denuded of parts of the Gallilee and Negev and to be denied sovereignty over Jerusalem.

With Mr. Barak in power, the administration's responsibility is to help lower Palestinian sights, not feed their ambitions. This means advocating real, substantive concessions from the PA. So far, all the Palestinian concessions in the Oslo process have been temporal, not territorial: Mr. Arafat has postponed claims but not abandoned them. In fact, as the campaign on U.N. resolutions shows, the Palestinians have moved the goalposts: They are now demanding that Israel return not to the 1967 borders, but to those of 1947. If Washington permits that strategy to proceed unchecked, U.S. officials will still be grappling with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the 22nd century.

Israel is a divided country in many ways -- religious vs. secular, Ashkenazi vs. Sephardic, haves vs. have-nots. But on the peace process, Mr. Netanyahu's legacy is that Mr. Barak stands ready to lead a united Israel to peace with security. Washington's job is to help make it happen.

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