

Israel: A State Divided?

The very fact that Israeli leaders on the center-right of the political spectrum are getting so anxious, even angry, strongly suggests two rumors are true:

1. The Obama administration and the Europeans are putting enormous pressure on the Netanyahu government behind the scenes to say yes to an American-crafted peace plan; and
2. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is seriously contemplating agreeing to deeply painful and enormously controversial concessions, possibly even dividing Jerusalem and rolling Israel back to her pre-1967 borders.

Many analysts have felt for the past year that Secretary Kerry's frenetic efforts to jump-start the Israeli-Palestinian peace process were going nowhere and doomed to failure. Now there is rapidly growing evidence that Kerry has driven the two parties into the corner and that he appears to be putting the most pressure on the Israeli side to make the deepest concessions.

Here's what we know so far:

In his address to the U.N. General Assembly last October, Netanyahu signaled he was preparing to make "painful concessions" for peace.

"Israel continues to seek an historic compromise with our Palestinian neighbors, one that ends our conflict once and for all," the prime minister said. "We want peace based on security and mutual recognition, in which a demilitarized Palestinian state recognizes the Jewish state of Israel. I remain committed to achieving an historic reconciliation and building a better future for Israelis and Palestinians alike. Now, I have no illusions about how difficult this will be to achieve. Twenty years ago, the peace process between Israel

and the Palestinians began. Six Israeli prime ministers, myself included, have not succeeded at achieving peace with the Palestinians. My predecessors were prepared to make painful concessions. So am I. But so far the Palestinian leaders haven't been prepared to offer the painful concessions they must make in order to end the conflict."

At the time, it wasn't clear anyone was listening to that paragraph or believed him—after all, the bulk of that speech was about the Iran nuclear threat. But Israelis are listening now, and some are growing angry, even those within his own government.

Two weeks ago, for example, Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon lashed out at the American plan, describing it as worthless, naïve, "messianic" and dangerous.

"The American security plan presented to us is not worth the paper it's written on," Ya'alon said. "It contains no peace and no security. Only our continued presence in Judea and Samaria and the River Jordan will endure that Ben-Gurion Airport and Netanya don't become targets for rockets from every direction. American Secretary of State John Kerry, who turned up here determined and acting out of misplaced obsession and messianic fervor, cannot teach me anything about the conflict with the Palestinians. ... Abu Mazen [Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas] is alive and well thanks to us. The moment we leave Judea and Samaria [the West Bank] he is finished. In reality, there have been no negotiations between us and the Palestinians for all these months—but rather between us and the Americans. The only thing that can 'save us' is for John Kerry to win a Nobel Prize and leave us in peace."

The Obama administration was furious, and Ya'alon apologized, sort of, under pressure from Netanyahu.

This week, Israeli Economic Minister Naftali Bennett lashed

out at the American plan and harshly warned Netanyahu not to give away Judea and Samaria and put Jewish settlers under Palestinian sovereignty.

“Our forefathers and our descendants will not forgive an Israeli leader who gives up our country and divides our capital,” Bennett warned, adding that the government’s growing fear of boycotts “is what will bring on the boycott. This is no way to handle negotiations, running frightened between the capitals of the world.”

Bennett later added that the prime minister’s approach “reflects the loss of a moral compass. We didn’t experience 2,000 years of yearning for the Land of Israel so that we could live under the government of Abu Mazen. Anyone thinking of placing the lives of Jews in the Land of Israel under Palestinian rule is pulling the rug out from under our presence in Tel Aviv. ... I call on the prime minister to immediately reject this terrible idea.”

Netanyahu’s team threatened to fire Bennett from the ruling coalition unless he took back his personal attack. Eventually, Bennett apologized, sort of.

Such tensions would not be flaring this intensely if Kerry wasn’t about to lower the boom on Israel and if center-right political leaders in Israel weren’t so worried Netanyahu was about to agree to far-reaching concessions.

Consider the following:

What is in the “framework agreement”? The Obama team has leaked key details to Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*:

“The ‘Kerry Plan,’ likely to be unveiled soon, is expected to call for an end to the conflict and all claims, following a phased Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank (based on the 1967 lines), with unprecedented security arrangements in the strategic Jordan Valley. The Israeli withdrawal will not

include certain settlement blocs, but Israel will compensate the Palestinians for them with Israeli territory. It will call for the Palestinians to have a capital in Arab East Jerusalem and for Palestinians to recognize Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people. It will not include any right of return for Palestinian refugees into Israel proper.”

Is there evidence that Netanyahu and Abbas are trying to prepare their people for painful concessions? Here’s an interesting analysis of the “framework agreement”—and Kerry’s effort to hammer out “interim” deals on both the Iran issue and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—by David Ignatius of the *Washington Post*:

- [The] issues may still prove insoluble: Listening to Israeli Finance Minister Naftali Bennett at a conference here Tuesday, it was clear how vehemently the right-wing settlers’ movement he represents would oppose a Palestinian state. “Our forefathers and ancestors and our descendants will never forgive an Israeli leader who gives away our land and divides our capital,” Bennett said, his voice almost a shout.
- Yet the prospect of a framework agreement, of the sort Kerry is seeking, seemed tantalizingly close in comments by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to the gathering, which was sponsored by the Institute for National Security Studies.
- Netanyahu told the conference that the U.S. was compiling a document that would summarize the points that have emerged during the months of secret Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.
- He said that Israel might agree to further talks under this framework, while not accepting all the U.S. ideas, as long as the Palestinians agree to a demilitarized state that guarantees Israel’s security and accepts Israel’s status as a homeland for the Jewish people.

- Abbas said in televised remarks to the conference that he might be willing to accept a phased, three-year Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and continued presence by other military forces, as ways of satisfying Netanyahu's security concerns.
- Amos Yadlin, a retired chief of Israeli military intelligence who heads the institute that hosted the conference, described Kerry's goal: "It's a framework agreement, or an agreement on a framework, or an American piece of paper," he said, but the aim was to roll forward the negotiations for another nine months.
- The White House has backed Kerry's attempt to pull together the parameters that have emerged in the negotiations, rather than simply striving for another round of confidence-building measures, such as Israeli releases of Palestinian prisoners and Abbas' restraint from taking his case for a Palestinian state to the United Nations.
- As in the Iran negotiations, a framework agreement would patch over what are still wide differences on a permanent, final-status agreement. But they would reduce the risk of outright conflict while diplomacy continues.

What are the political ramifications inside Israel if Netanyahu says yes to the U.S. "framework agreement"? Useful analysis by Jeffrey Goldberg of *Bloomberg News*:

- U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry is obviously getting somewhere in his attempt to achieve a framework agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, because all the right people—the far-right people—are going a little nuts.
- At a security conference this week in Israel, Naftali Bennett, the leader of the Jewish Home party—reacting to an earlier suggestion made by the leader of his governing coalition, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, that Jewish settlers could conceivably find themselves

living under Palestinian rule one day— asked, “Why should Jews live in Tel Aviv with Israeli sovereignty and in Eli and Hebron under Palestinian sovereignty? Open up the Book of Genesis and form an opinion. I demand that this idea be removed from the agenda.” ...

- Netanyahu, unlike a set of government ministers to his right, including Bennett, understands that Israel’s addiction to West Bank settlements is undermining the legitimacy of his country, and endangering its role as a democratic haven for Jews.
- This is why he appears to be taking small rhetorical steps in Kerry’s direction—floating the idea that Jews on the West Bank could remain where they are under Palestinian rule (a proposal the Palestinians, so far, at least, reject) is one way he’s signaling to the Israeli public that unpopular decisions might be coming.
- Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas also seems to be bending under Kerry’s pressure, offering just this week a concession of his own: Israelis forces, he said, could remain in parts of the West Bank for as long as three years after an agreement is struck. Previously, Abbas had argued that all Israeli forces must depart as soon as a deal is made.
- For Israelis, there are two ways to look at Kerry’s Herculean (and often Sisyphean) efforts to outline an agreement between extremely hesitant parties.
- The first way is Bennett’s: Much of the Israeli right sees Kerry as the enemy, trying to break the will of their prime minister in order to uproot settlers and create a Palestinian state that will become a source of endless violence.
- The second way is the one favored by Israelis of the center and the left: suspicion of grandiose American schemes but also a sober realization that someone needs to figure out a way to disentangle Israel from the lives of its Palestinian neighbors, and that that person may well be Kerry.

The particular difficulty for Netanyahu is that he might have both of these understandings fighting it out in his head.

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