

Against a Palestinian State: Netanyahu's Electoral Promise

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The "I told you so" school of commentary is bound to be out in force after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's pre-electoral statement on his opposition to a Palestinian state. It clarified what many had been suspicious about: his genuine non-commitment, not merely to peace with the Palestinians, but the idea of a Palestinian state.

In 2009, Netanyahu addressed an audience at Bar Ilan University making statements that were barely believable, but nonetheless part of the rhetorical moment necessity sometimes demands.[1] "We are gathered this evening in an institution named for two pioneers of peace, Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat, and we share in their vision."

But reading between the chosen lines, and you could already see where the Netanyahu reasoning would take you. Palestinians had to "recognise the right of the Jewish people to a state of their own in this land". Not doing so would impair discussions. As for stateless Palestinians, "We do not want to rule over them, we do not want to govern their lives, we do not want to impose either our flag or our culture on them." His vision: "two peoples live freely, side-by-side, in amity and mutual respect."

Instead, Bibi has continued construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and taken a mad-dog approach to Iran which has worked in some segments of the Israeli electorate. The fear for him, however, is whether that same electorate, for all its angst, is suffering "Bibi fatigue". The Labor Party, rebranded the Zionist Union, and Hatnua might be able to pull off more seats combined than Likud, but the complicated mathematics of coalitions will have to play out.

Such marked hollowness was all but confirmed on Monday, when an electorally geared Netanyahu came clean on his vision about the Palestinians and their state aspirations. On a video interview published on the right-leaning news site, NRG, the prime minister outlined his revised position, which should be regarded as a position he never strayed from. "I think that anyone who is going to establish a Palestinian state today and evacuate lands is giving attack grounds to radical Islam against the state of Israel."

The interpretative spin put on this is one of fluid change and disturbing circumstances, rather than the issue of Palestinian statehood per se. But it also suggests a conventional spitting in the eye of one's opponent - Palestinians can't be trusted with their sovereignty, in the event Islamic terrorism spearheaded by Iran takes root. Ergo, Palestinians can never have statehood, for to allow it would give birth to permanent barricades on Israel's doorstep.

The Prime Minister's Office also released a statement of clarification, which suggested that

Bibi had been thinking in that way all along. Netanyahu “has made clear for years that given the current conditions in the Middle East, any territory that is given will be seized by the radical Islam just like what happened in Gaza and southern Lebanon.”[2]

A weekly Shabbat pamphlet, authored by Tzipi Hotovely, came close in describing the long standing Netanyahu sentiment: “Netanyahu’s entire political biography is a fight against the creation of a Palestinian state.”[3]

A good dose of demonising was also thrown in ahead of Tuesday’s elections. Likud is seemingly trailing its rivals, calling for a good round of old fashioned scare mongering. Vote for the left, and you would essentially be voting for fifth columnists with an internationalist agenda fashioned outside Israel. “There is a real threat here that a left-wing government will join the international community and follow its orders.” This following of orders would comprise the freezing of construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and a move towards a dreaded return to Israel’s 1967 borders (*Haaretz*, Mar 16).[4]

This warning hardly fits. The main contender Isaac Herzog of the centre-left Zionist Union is barely brimming with optimism about agreement with the Palestinians either. He has even suggested, just to give him some electoral legroom, that any agreement on a two-state solution might be impossible. To cover his progressive base, he pays lip service to the idea. A good dose of pessimism regarding peace negotiations is always deemed a mandatory tonic in Israeli political cycles.

The Herzog strategy has been, instead, to focus on Bibi as a loose canon, alienator in chief, estranger par excellence. Relations with Washington have taken a good bruising at the hands of Netanyahu’s megalomania. Israel risks further isolation with its various stances regarding negotiations with Iran. Then there is the issue of the price of living, a frightening prospect for Israelis given the increase of prices by 55 per cent from 2008 to 2013. Israel has a chronic housing crisis. And while prices rise, the prime minister has been gorging on his takeout menu, a point noted in a state comptroller report by Joseph Haim Shapira.[5]

Against estrangement, Herzog is angling for being “a prime minister for everyone. For right and left, for settlers, Haredim, Druze, Arabs, Circassians; I will be prime minister for the centre and for the periphery.” But the great casualty in the electoral rhetoric must remain the two state solution. At least we know that, for Palestinian statehood to be recognised, Netanyahu must be forgotten.

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Notes

[1] http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2009/Pages/Address_PM_Netanyahu_Bar-Ilan_University_14-Jun-2009.aspx

[2] <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.645912>

[3] <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.645912>

[4] <http://www.haaretz.com/news/israel-election-2015/1.647212>

[5] <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/18/world/middleeast/israeli-inquiry-faults-netanyahu-over-expenses.html>

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