

Netanyahu's New Quest: The Game is On

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"We've accomplished quite a few things, and I think the most important one is to cement the principle that the path to peace is through negotiations and not through violence."

These were the 'encouraging' words modestly uttered by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, during a joint press conference with the US president. The President was then Bill Clinton, and the date was October 2, 1996 .

In the occupied Palestinian territories, the situation then seemed incredibly grim. But there was no Israeli wall. The settlements were smaller in size and in population. Gaza was besieged, but not to the point of total suffocation.

Recently, Prime Minister Netanyahu paid a highly anticipated visit to the White House, on May 18, 2009 , this time meeting with Barack Obama.

"I share with you very much the desire to move the peace process forward. And I want to start peace negotiations with the Palestinians. I would like to broaden the circle of peace to include others in the Arab world," said Netanyahu.

One need not emphasize the harm inflicted upon the Palestinian people during those years. The violence, which Netanyahu seemingly decried in '96, visited Palestinians countless times. Starting December 27, 2008 and for 22 frightening days, much of Gaza was decimated by the Israeli army, using US weapons, killing and wounding thousands. There is now a giant wall, hundreds of miles in length, snaking around the West Bank, separating Palestinians from their land, livelihoods and any possibility of a true statehood. There are Jewish settlements, joined by Jewish-only roads that hopelessly fragment the occupied West Bank . They all are illegal under international law, as is the so-called Separation Wall, as are the brutal attacks and siege on Gaza, as is the Israeli military occupation altogether.

We are told that Obama is serious about peace in the Middle East . He maybe is. But even such assumed seriousness might not be able to change the disturbing pattern that forced Clinton before him, according to former top Middle East Advisor, Aaron David Miller, to utter the following words: "Who the f*** does he think he is? Who's the f***ing superpower here?"

In recent meetings between the two leaders, Obama clearly highlighted his country's commitment to a Palestinian state, and, surprisingly, made mention of " Gaza " during the press conference. But the words of praise of Israel 's greatness were at an all time high. "Obama talked about the 'extraordinary relationship [with Israel], the special relationship ...the stalwart ally ... the historical ties, emotional ties [and] the only democracy in the Middle East ... a source of admiration and inspiration for the American people'," observed commentator George Hishmeh.

Following his meeting with Obama, Netanyahu made a visit to the US Congress, where he conferred with the “great friends of Israel “. On his visit to Capitol Hill, he met House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and House Minority Leader John Boehner. The Israeli leader also met members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Jewish legislators. He was given the same exceptional treatment enjoying by other Israeli leaders. Committee chairman Senator John Kerry was “encouraged by a number of things” Netanyahu had said. Following meeting with Congressional leaders, Netanyahu observed, as if breaking some unexpected news: there is “an American consensus” regarding “the special relationship we have between Israel and the United States “.

The game is on. Netanyahu will once again try to overwhelm the President of the United States by rallying the Congress behind him in preparation for any possible confrontation with Obama’s administration. Obama, on the other hand, will attempt, however bashfully, to assert a new direction in US foreign policy – through tempting Israel by embracing harsher Iran policies and pressuring the Arabs to normalize with the Jewish state in exchange for Israel ’s mere promise of moving the peace process forward.

In 1996, Netanyahu spoke of the immediate danger facing Israel , in reference to Iraq . Now Iraq – which had no weapons of mass destruction, after all – is no longer an “existential threat” to the state of Israel .

And now the Israeli leader has set his sights on Iran . “The challenge is the potential arming of Iran with nuclear weapons capabilities. That is a great danger to all of us .. We have to do this in tandem .. I was very encouraged to learn that this is the American policy. We’re going to try to do it together, because if we do it together we’ll get a lot further, a lot faster.”

It might not take thirteen more years before Netanyahu’s wishes come true, before getting a lot further, a lot faster, i.e. unleashing a war against Iran. But mark my words, Netanyahu, as well as those before him, as well as those after him, have no intentions of making peace with the Palestinians. He is simply waving a carrot before Obama to get what Israel wants, an attack on Iran . It’s as simple as that.

If Obama hesitates in confronting the new Israeli agenda, and if the Congress continues to treat Israel ’s security obsessions as top American priorities, there is no telling what the Middle East will look like the next time Netanyahu arrives in Washington to meet the new American president.

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