

# Secret Peace Deal on Hold: Peace Held Hostage to Rotating US, Israeli Elections

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The statement by former U.S. President George W. Bush in his 497 - page memoir of "Decision Points" that a secret peace deal was worked out between the then-prime minister of Israel, Ehud Olmert, and Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, which "we devised a process to turn .. into a public agreement" had not Olmert been ousted by a scandal to be replaced in the following elections by Binyamin Netanyahu, who reneged on his predecessor's commitments, is a piece of history which highlights the fact that peace making in the Arab - Israeli conflict and the peace process have been hostages to the rotating U.S. and Israeli elections since the Madrid peace conference of 1991.

Of course Bush had a different point of view. In his Rose Garden speech on Israel - Palestine two-state solution on June 24, 2002, he said that "for too long .. the citizens of the Middle East" and "the hopes of many" have been held "hostage" to "the hatred of a few (and) the forces of extremism and terror," a misjudgement that led his administration to strike a deal with the former Israeli premier, now comatose, Ariel Sharon to engineer a "regime change" in the self-ruled Palestinian Authority that resulted - according to Sharon's terminology - in the "removal" of Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian leader who made peace possible in the first place for the first time in the past one hundred years and for that deserved to be a Nobel Peace Laureate, to be replaced by the incumbent Palestinian leadership of Abbas who, despite being almost identical of both men's image of a peace maker, is again victimized by the same rotating U.S. and Israeli elections, much more than by what Bush termed as "forces of extremism and terror."

Ironically, Bush's own Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, some three years ago, had to admit that there is no consensus among U.S. officials on a clear-cut definition of "extremism and terror" when she said, referring to acts of Palestinian anti-Israeli military occupation, that, "The prolonged experience of deprivation and humiliation can radicalize even normal people." Even Olmert's care-taker successor and the opposition leader now, Tziporah Malkah "Tzipi" Livni, became the first ever Israeli cabinet minister to strike a line between an "enemy" and a "terrorist" when she told U.S. TV show "Nightline" on March 28, 2006: "Somebody who is fighting against Israeli soldiers is an enemy .. I believe that this is not under the definition of terrorism."

However, judging from the incumbent Barack Obama administration's adoption of Bush's perspectives on the issue, as vindicated by Obama's similar stance vis-à-vis the Palestinian anti-Israeli military resistance, in particular from the Gaza Strip, and the Israeli captive corporal Gilad Shalit, the U.S. successive administrations - whether Democrats or Republicans is irrelevant - are still insistent on shooting their Middle East peace efforts in the feet by giving the priority in peace making to fighting "extremism and terror" rather

than to make peace as the prerequisite to ruling out the root causes of both evils.

Once and again, then again and again, U.S. and Israeli elections bring about new players and governments that renege on the commitments, pledges and promises of their predecessors vis - a -vis the Arab - Israeli conflict in general and the Palestinian - Israeli peace process in particular, with an overall effect of being much more harmful to peace making than any forces of 'extremism.'

This overall effect is devastating. First and foremost it creates the vicious circle of unfulfilled promises and hopes, which in turn, secondly, undermines what little confidence might still be there to believe in the same pledges of the newcomers, which their predecessors reneged on. Third, the repeatedly aborted endeavors for a breakthrough renders the "peace process" less an honest attempt on conflict resolution and more a crisis management effort, which is the last thing the Palestinian and Arab "peace partners" would like to put on their agenda. The ensuing environment of these and other factors is, fourth, the ideal setting for opening a new "window of opportunity" as soon as an old one is closed for "the forces of extremism" to exploit the political vacuum thus created. By default or by decision extremists in the Arab - Israeli conflict are U.S. and Israeli made as well as they are a legitimate byproduct of a failed process where the mission of peace making has been moving on from an old administration to a new one, each with a new plan that hardly takes off before another is offered by new players.

The outcome of the latest U.S. mid-term elections was not an exception. Both Palestinian and Israeli protagonists were on edge "waiting" for a new equation that would change the balance of power between the incumbent administration and the Congress to serve their respective goals and expectations, and a change did occur that will curtail the ability of President Obama to follow up on his pledges to deliver on his promises of peace making. The Palestinian disappointment is on the verge of despair to consider alternatives to the U.S. sponsorship of peace making, let alone continuing a peace process that has been counterproductive all along. The Israeli jubilation is on the verge of declaring an Israeli victory in a non-Israeli U.S. Congress over a U.S. president who never even thought of compromising the U.S. - Israeli strategic alliance or the decades old commitment of successive administrations to the security of Israel, but only pondered a non-binding plan to bring the protagonists together to decide for themselves through strictly bilateral direct negotiations that rule beforehand any external intervention.

Obama's plan, to all practical reasons, is thus aborted in the bud and its file is about to be archived on top of the pile of the older files of the earlier plans of presidents Reagan, Bush senior, Clinton and Bush junior, which were swept away to the dustbin of history by the rotating U.S. or Israeli elections, while holding the Palestinian negotiator hostage to a process that nothing indicates it will ever end, waiting for the U.S. Godot.

Holding the Palestinian negotiator hostage to this open-ended U.S.-sponsored process is now and has been always the only game in town for the Israelis, the only beneficiaries of the ever explosive status quo of the Arab - Israeli conflict, who have been exploiting the peace process as a playground to win more time to create more facts on the ground that will sooner or later render the temporary status quo created by their military occupation of 1967 into a permanent regional arrangement.

Netanyahu's anti-Oslo campaign was interpreted to create the political environment that

contributed to the assassination of Yitzhaq Rabin on November 4, 1995, two years after signing the Oslo agreement (Declaration of Principles) with Arafat - who was suspiciously poisoned to death on November 11, 2004 - and Netanyahu's election to the premiership immediately thereafter was interpreted as an anti-peace coup d'état. When the 1999 elections brought back to power the so-called "peace camp" led by Labor, PM Ehud Barak did not bring the "peace process" back to Rabin track, but reneged on the signed agreements, refused to implement the imminent and final withdrawal from the West Bank and succeeded, with U.S. help, in dragging the Palestinian side to jump to the intractable final status issues. The following elections followed the collapse of the Camp David trilateral summit and the ensuing violence, which led the new premier, Ariel Sharon, to declare the death of Oslo accord. Sharon succeeded in recruiting the support of George W. Bush to put the change of the Palestinian Authority (PA) regime of Arafat as the only item on the agenda of the "peace process" as a precondition to its resumption and convinced Bush to delay the official launch of the "Road Map" until after the Israeli elections. All that done already, and a new PA regime of their liking is already in place, but the Map has yet to be implemented. Two years ago, Obama had a plan to negotiate how to renegotiate the Road Map, but the latest Israeli elections brought to power Netanyahu who seems determined to negotiate only on how to implement his own unilateral plans.

No surprise then Palestinian negotiators are almost concluding that enough is enough, that they are left with no options but to get rid of this rotating electoral vicious circle and let come whatever, it would not be worse than the current status of being captives to a waiting game for a Godot that will never come.

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