



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

There is a chill in the US-Israeli relationship with the current administration. The Obama Administration is not playing ball the way the Bush team did. How seriously is the Israeli government taking this game change?

I don't think they are taking it seriously enough. The Israeli government has to understand that generally the world, and a large part of Americans, will not continue unconditional support of Israel if it keeps on with the occupation and the dead-lock with negotiation. The leadership and people must grasp that there is a price to pay for the occupation and settlements. The US knows that Israel is under existential threat, needs help from abroad and is a positive force in the Middle East but not as an occupier that rules Palestinians and continues settlement activity. Some in the government are beginning to understand that they cannot do whatever they want and continue to build settlements. I think that's the reason we are seeing some freezing of settlements. They need to understand this is more than Obama replacing Bush. This is a part of a process where the world is not willing to keep accepting a continued occupation.

Was Prime Minister Netanyahu's recent trip to Egypt mainly for show or was there anything substantive to it?

Basically I don't see this as a breakthrough. Netanyahu did not make a strategic move for peace but a move not to go to war. He tries to handle the situation by doing the minimum that he can and still be able to continue the relationship with America and the Arab world.

Can you comment on the Palestinian Prime Minister? I understand he is teaching civil disobedience as an alternative to violence. How is he seen by Israelis?

I think Israelis now understand that in the West Bank there is a leadership that can deliver security for Israelis, control the Palestinian territory and make huge steps towards peace. But there is a fear that [Salam] Fayyad will declare a unilateral Palestinian state without approval or agreement with Israelis. This kind of event would create difficulties and some instability on the ground. However, I also believe there is a lot of appreciation about what [President Mahmoud] Abbas and he are doing on the Palestinian front. Some Israelis are talking about him as the Palestinian Ben Gurion.



Haaretz just published results of a poll that found 57.6% of Jewish Israelis agree that human rights organizations that expose bad conduct by Israeli soldiers should not be allowed to operate freely. Is that not disturbing, given that Israel claims to be a vibrant democracy?

I agree it is disturbing. There is a campaign from the right wing and the government against every word of criticism that is being said by NGOs, especially if they have an effect in the international community. Along with that, we are also seeing more radical organizations making extreme statements such as going to other countries and trying to sue Israeli soldiers for war crimes. In the mind of Israelis, this is very difficult to digest. So, this data is not surprising.

Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin recently said, "I would rather have Palestinians as citizens of this country than divide up the land." Can you comment?

Brave to say, but silly to think like that...if Rivlin is a Zionist then he understands that it would be the end of the Zionist dream--as it will not allow Israel to remain a Jewish democratic state. I don't think he is seriously ready to give the Palestinians Israeli citizenship.

The proximity talks - how successful do you think they'll be?

It's too early to say and I don't want to be negative. However, I don't think Bibi will do anything unless he is forced. Yet even if it has an effect of freezing the settlements, it would be positive. I think we need to give it a chance...I am not optimistic but let's see what the Americans are planning to do with it.

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119 - 660 Eglinton Ave. E. Suite 517 Toronto, ON, M4G 2K2
PH 416-322-5559 1-866-405-5387 FX 416-322-5587 E-MAIL info@peacenowcanada.org WEB-SITE www.peacenowcanada.org

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CFPN Welcomes Proximity Talks

CFPN welcomes the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, and the involvement of Arab governments in the process that led to it.

CFPN Co-President Sheldon Gordon commented: "We very much hope that resuming negotiations, after 18 lost months, signifies the start of a new chapter in the decades-long effort to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We hope that the proximity talks will soon lead to the resumption of full-fledged bilateral talks on all the core issues. Proximity talks, after all, are a throwback to the 1949 Armistice negotiations and the 1973 Kissinger shuttle diplomacy—eras when the Arabs refused to negotiate face-to-face with Israel."

What we must all remember, however, is that mere talks -- whether direct or indirect -- are not -- and never have been -- the goal. The goal is an agreement that will resolve all the final status issues: settlements, borders, refugees, security, and Jerusalem, and end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To do that, both Israel and the Palestinians must approach the negotiations seriously and in good faith, and the U.S. must be patient, firm and resolute in its role as broker.

CFPN Co-President Stephen Scheinberg added: "For negotiations to be held in earnest, Israel must stop settlement activity in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Settlement construction signals that Israel is not serious about resolving all the final status issues through negotiations. Likewise, the Palestinians must take actions and public positions that indicate seriousness, and the US cannot recoil when things become difficult."

CFPN hopes there is truth to the rumours that Prime Minister Netanyahu has privately assured the U.S. that Israel is extending the settlement freeze to include Jerusalem without publicly saying so.



Strike at Iran Would Be "Catastrophic" for Israel

Tamar Ishaky, a Board member of CFPN Toronto, interviews Yariv Oppenheimer, Director-General of Shalom Achshav in Israel.

Regarding Iran, has Prime Minister Netanyahu backed himself into a corner? Has he warned so vehemently about a nuclear Iran being an existential threat to Israel that he will look weak if he doesn't launch an attack? Is Peace Now opposed to a unilateral military strike by Israel if sanctions against Iran fail to stop its progress toward the nuclear bomb?

I hope this is not an argument that he is considering. I also hope that making such a crucial and historical decision for the future of Israel and the region will not be based on how he appears. I am not a Netanyahu fan but I believe that, before he does anything, he would think deeply about what is best for Israel, in his view. As for Peace Now, this is not being discussed and I don't think raising it would be good, as it may make a strike more inevitable in the Israeli mind. We think this kind of action would be catastrophic for Israel. It will make it impossible to isolate Iran and will not stop it from getting the bomb. It will, however, make Israel look like the aggressor. Eventually this will lead to war with Arab terror organizations and maybe even armies.

If Iran succeeds in developing a nuclear weapon what impact would that have on Israel's strategic deterrence against its Arab enemies?

It may push Israel and the Arab moderates to make peace in order to create more balance with a nuclear Iran. But ultimately I don't think an Israeli strike is the answer.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

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New Settlement in Ras El-Amud

By Hagit Ofran



Last week, I got a midnight call from a Palestinian friend of mine: Hagit, I'm sorry to call you so late, but you always say to bug you whenever something happens... There is a truck with a trailer near my home. I don't know where it is heading. So he followed the truck through the streets of East Jerusalem, then called and said: Ras El-Amud. At the old police station.

I have been following the developments at the old police station in Ras El-Amud for a few years. On May 2008, the Israeli police left the building and moved to a new structure that was built at the disputed "E1" area near the settlement of Ma'ale Adumim. It was part of a deal between the settlers and the police, according to which, the settlers would pay for the construction of the new police headquarters, and in return will get the old one, which was built by the Jordanians on lands that belonged to Jews before 1948.

The settlers plan to knock down the old police station building and to build some 104 new housing units. The approval of such a plan should take several years, so they decided, meanwhile, to use the old building for a residence. The renovation of an existing building does not require a special permit, as long as all the works are made inside of the structure. However, any works on external walls require a construction permit from the Municipality. A request to make structural changes in the police building was filed with the Municipality on 17 December 2009, but as far as we know, such a permit has not yet been issued.

I went to see the place, and saw some trailers at the parking lot of the police station used as storage and offices for the renovation. A few dozen workers were working in and outside of the building. The construction of another settler compound in a Palestinian East Jerusalem neighborhood had started.

Some of the works performed there probably require permits, as they are performed on external walls. The settlers have also knocked down a structure adjacent to the police station building, which also requires a permit. With or without an official permit, this construction is surely not adding to the very delicate and fragile efforts to renew the negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

Ms. Ofran is Director of Peace Now's Settlement Watch project.

Where is the Israeli initiative?

By Mati Gill

Mr. Gill was bureau chief for the former minister of public security Avi Dichter.

Recently, we have heard of a Fayyad plan for the creation of a Palestinian state in provisional borders, at first at least. We also know that there is an Arab Peace Initiative, or Saudi plan, which calls for a comprehensive peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Both of these have been mostly ignored by Israeli governments, past and present.

However, over the past few weeks, more and more signs are pointing to an Obama plan which, void of any substantial progress in solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, would be thrust upon us most definitely in the fall, as a force to be reckoned with.

So the question is: What are we waiting for? Where is the Israeli initiative? The comprehensive Netanyahu plan or policy?

In the diplomatic arena, there is no such thing as a vacuum. In any conflict, there will always be a proposed solution. So why leave the initiative to the other side or to a third-party mediator? When Israel had no strategy for the exit from Lebanon toward the end of the Second Lebanon War, we were forced to deal with initiatives that came out of Beirut and Washington, and in the end were relegated to making the best deal we could from a starting point of a compromise that is now called UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

This rule of no vacuum is especially true in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has think tanks and even an entire "peace industry" dedicated to working on resolutions. Initiatives, policy papers and plans can be found by many entities, all except for the Israeli government.

This is not necessarily a negative thing. However, it poses a great challenge for any government dedicated to maintaining the status quo, for whatever reason. This is not a sustainable position. A policy based on a principle which can best be described as "no substantial decisions," as we have now with our current government, cannot survive for long.

For it is now clear that nobody is waiting for the government to develop a plan or a coherent policy. It is a general consensus in the Israeli public that we need a two-state solution. This is both vital and urgent to our future as a Jewish and democratic state. We should aspire, however, to reach such a solution on our terms, in accordance with our essential priorities and needs.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3 [BOTTOM]



Interview with Yossi Alpher

Mr. Alpher is the former director of the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University, and a former senior official with the Mossad. His views do not necessarily reflect those of Peace Now.

Israeli-Palestinian proximity peace talks are finally a reality. What are the obstacles to success?

The list is long. But before embarking on it, let it be noted that these are important talks. Even if they fail, by their very existence they could set the scene for a more substantive U.S. role than mere mediating, in the form of an Administration peace proposal or a U.S.-hosted international peace conference. Meanwhile, they provide "cover" for additional Administration efforts, for example in preventing settlement construction, demanding confidence-building measures from Israel and shepherding the Palestinian Authority's state-building project. If the Palestinian side is sufficiently forthcoming with its compromise proposals, the talks could also precipitate a shakeup in the Netanyahu coalition (with Kadima replacing or even joining right-wing parties) that might render the process more feasible.

The talks are also important in blunting criticism of Israel in the U.S. security establishment.

The obstacles to the success of these talks are to be found in three different camps: Israel, Palestine and the Arab world. In Israel, the most obvious stumbling blocks are PM Binyamin Netanyahu's own territorial approach--seeking to hold onto all of "united" Jerusalem and the Jordan Valley--and the pro-settler factions among his coalition partners.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

So again, what are we waiting for? For the Obama administration to force upon us an American peace plan, as all signs out of Washington are pointing to? Do we really want to take a chance, roll the dice and possibly leave the parameters for a final-status solution to a plan to be dictated by the U.S.? Wouldn't it be better for the government to develop its own policy for such a solution, its own initiative?

We need such a policy with clear parameters for an achievable resolution, on our terms, in accordance with compromises and red lines that we decide upon, and are not forced upon us. This needs to be done sooner rather than later.

The window of opportunity for the development of such a plan is rapidly closing, probably by the fall, with the probable unveiling of the Obama plan. Unlike the famous song, "time is not on our side."

The latter are almost certain to seek to sabotage the talks with provocations such as establishing new outposts and attacking Palestinian civilians. Netanyahu himself is spearheading a campaign to condemn Palestinian incitement (which exists, but has been radically reduced in recent years) even as, in Israel, anti-Arab incitement increases. Defense Minister Ehud Barak, who represents the only center-left faction in the coalition, the Labor party, got it right last week when he predicted the talks would fail unless Kadima was brought into the coalition.

On the Palestinian side, President Mahmoud Abbas is constrained by his own extreme ideological demands on issues like the right of return and Arab ownership of the Temple Mount. When he looks over his shoulders, he sees his own Fateh hardliners on one side and Hamas in Gaza on the other. He knows that, ultimately, a peace deal with Israel will be hard to sustain without some sort of reconciliation with Hamas, yet he can't begin to move in that direction until and unless he registers some negotiating achievements to bolster his camp.

That is one vicious circle Abbas has to contend with. Another is his decision to subject his participation in negotiations to Arab League approval, where Syria and Libya, like Hamas back home, can exercise a kind of veto power. It is the Arab League that has limited the proximity talks to four months, while it is Abbas himself who insists on non-direct talks, apparently out of fear that the failure of direct negotiations could hurt him politically with all these concentric circles of potential Arab critics. The League's threat of veto, the time limit on the talks and their indirect nature are all potential obstacles to the success of this new peace initiative.

Administration mistakes help account for the long delay in actually convening these proximity talks. But in the long term, if the negotiations register any sort of success--by encouraging confidence-building measures, ushering in direct talks, changing the make-up of Netanyahu's coalition, setting the stage for deeper and more meaningful American involvement or cushioning the emergence on the international scene of a unilaterally established Palestinian state--that delay will be justifiably forgiven and forgotten.