

COMMENTARY

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There Will Be No Palestinian State under Netanyahu's Watch

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President Trump should not be swayed by Netanyahu's duplicitous argument, however convincing it might sound, that he is committed to a two-state solution when in fact he has opposed and will continue to reject in principle the creation of an independent Palestinian state under any circumstances.

Netanyahu's repeated assertions that he is ready to negotiate with the Palestinians unconditionally is hollow because he knows that President Abbas will not enter into negotiations unless Israel suspends the continuing expansion of settlements and the creeping annexation of Palestinian land, which prevents the Palestinians from establishing their own viable state.

To establish Netanyahu's lack of commitment, one has to simply observe his actions in the occupied territories and listen to his public narrative, which squarely contradicts his presumed willingness to negotiate an end to the conflict. Netanyahu's objections in words and deeds to the creation of a Palestinian state are undisputedly manifested in the following:

First, Netanyahu's insistence that he is ready to negotiate unconditionally is in and of itself a precondition. Suppose President Abbas agrees to negotiate on that basis—there is simply no avoiding the requirement to first, agree on rules of engagement, including the venue, makeup of the negotiating teams, their mandate, etc. Most importantly, they must agree on which of the main conflicting issues to tackle first that could facilitate negotiations on other critical issues.

Netanyahu has all along refused to commence negotiations by first meeting the Palestinians' demand to establish the contours of their future state. Instead, he kept insisting that Israel must first negotiate the mechanism that would ensure its national security. The fact, however, that he

always sought “secure borders” would have made it reasonable and practical to negotiate borders first.

This would not only establish what constitutes (from his perspective) secure borders, but it would have also met the Palestinians’ demands and given them the confidence that a future state will eventually be created. In conjunction with that, the future of many of the settlements could have also been settled. Netanyahu’s insistence, however, on negotiating national security first was nothing but a ploy designed to play for time as previous negotiations have clearly shown.

Second, Netanyahu presides over a coalition government that includes, other than his own right-of-centre Likud party, two other extremely right-wing parties—Yisrael Beiteinu and Jewish Home, led by Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Education Minister Naftali Bennett, respectively, who are both committed and subservient to the settlement movement. Bennett in particular openly calls for the annexation of much of the West Bank, especially Area C, which constitutes 61 per cent of the Palestinian territory.

If Netanyahu were to embark in earnest on negotiating a two-state solution, this would immediately unravel his government, as these two parties (along with many members of his own Likud party) have threatened to leave the government if he were to take such a step. Thus, as long as he maintains the present make-up of the current government, there is absolutely no prospect of reaching a peace agreement that would grant the Palestinians a state of their own.

Following his 2015 campaign for re-election, Netanyahu clearly stated, “I think that anyone who moves to establish a Palestinian state today, and evacuate areas, is giving radical Islam an area from which to attack the State of Israel. The left has buried its head in the sand time and after time and ignores this...” When asked whether a Palestinian state would not be created under his leadership, the prime minister said “Indeed.” What he said then he still means today; anything he says to the contrary is for show.

Third, the unabated expansion of existing settlements and the passage of the recent law that authorizes the government to retroactively legalize scores of illegal settlements unambiguously suggests that he has no intention whatsoever of allowing the Palestinians to establish a state of their own. This systematic annexation of Palestinian land makes it impossible for them to maintain land contiguity. To suggest, as he claims, that the settlements are not an obstacle to peace is disingenuous at best and he knows it. Under Netanyahu’s watch, the government has built a major network of roads crisscrossing the West Bank exclusively designated for the settlers, while confining the Palestinians to cantons with the intention of making the current status quo permanent.

Fourth, his objective is to settle at least one million Israelis throughout the West Bank and create irreversible facts on the ground. Currently, there are nearly 650,000 settlers in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, making the removal of any significant number of settlers simply impossible. The lesson that Netanyahu's father, Benzion Netanyahu, who was a staunch revisionist Zionist, ingrained in his son was the belief that all of the biblical "land of Israel" belongs to the Jews in perpetuity. In a 2009 interview, Benzion stated, "The two-state solution doesn't exist. ...There is no Palestinian people, so you don't create a state for an imaginary nation." That lesson was not lost on Netanyahu.

Not surprisingly, whenever Israel's Supreme Court orders the removal of a certain illegal settlement built on private Palestinian land, such as the recent dismantling of Amona with roughly 250 settlers, Netanyahu immediately announces plans to build new units. He is determined that the number of settlers continues to grow to reach the milestone of one million, regardless of what the Israeli courts decide or the international community demands—including the US, Israel's closest ally.

Fifth, if Netanyahu were to truly opt to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the basis of a two-state solution, he could disband his current and establish a new coalition government composed of several centrist and left-of-centre parties, including the Zionist Union, Yesh Atid, Kulanu, Meretz, and Netanyahu's own Likud party, which would provide him a decisive majority of 80 out of 120 seats in the parliament, versus the current government of Likud, Kulanu, Shas, Jewish Home, Yisrael Beiteinu, and UTJ, a very slim majority of 67 out of 120 seats. Although some members of his own party will defect, he will still have a significant majority that reflects the aspiration of the Israelis who want to end the conflict. It should be noted that with a new government, the 13 members of the Arab List would support any initiative towards a two-state solution.

Such a coalition can certainly agree on an equitable peace with the Palestinians that would entail some land swaps if only Netanyahu wills it. Sadly, however, Netanyahu simply will not entertain such a peace agreement because he is ideologically committed to control in perpetuity all of what he terms the 'Land of Israel', while accusing the Palestinians of wanting to destroy rather than make peace with Israel.

To be sure, Netanyahu is not and has never been a proponent of creating a Palestinian state. Hence, President Trump will be wise not to engage him during his visit to the White House in a futile discussion searching for an agreement based on a two-state solution. This outcome cannot and will not happen as long as Netanyahu is in power.

If Trump is serious about his desire to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for Israel's own sake, he must demand that Netanyahu commit himself to create a Palestinian state not by simply stating so, but by taking concrete steps to form a new government composed of the left, centre, and his own party, hold a new election, or resign.

Note: This article was originally published in the web portal of Prof. Ben-Meir and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://alonben-meir.com/writing/will-no-palestinian-state-netanyahus-watch/>

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