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In The End, Bet On Israeli Hawks To Forge The Peace

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You could always count on the leftists here for certain things. They have proven themselves superb novelists and collective farmers, singer-songwriters and operators of fighter-bombers. They are unsurpassed at holding demonstrations, signing petitions, opening channels of communication in the arts, in academia, and, trans-wall, on the ground with the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza.

They just can't make peace.

It's okay. After 60 years of war, more than half of it under nominally left-leaning governments, we've grown used to it. In fact, large sectors of the Labor left have already essentially washed their hands of peacemaking. For years the spiritual leader of the peace non-movement has been Ehud Barak, beginning with his short-lived reign as titular head of the Israeli left.

At this point, not only do we expect the left to drop the ball. we don't so much as expect the left to pick it up. If someone eventually makes peace with the Palestinians, we allow, it's more than likely to be someone from the right. And not only because - as has often happened in the past - the right has kneecapped any attempt by the left to reach and implement a peace accord.

We began to accustom ourselves to this when it was Menachem Begin, of all people, derided by the left as an unrepentant and unapologetic right-wing terrorist, who went ahead and agreed to trade away 89 percent of the total land mass of the occupied territories for Israel's first full peace treaty with an Arab state.

Years later, Labor under Yitzhak Rabin would forge a landmark but ultimately fragile peace with Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization, but only after Yitzhak Shamir, of all

people, operational mastermind of the violent Lehi or Stern Gang, agreed to sit down in Madrid with a Palestinian negotiating team that was a thinly veiled delegation of the PLO.

It would take the right under Benjamin Netanyahu to withdraw from most Palestinian territory in Hebron, the city second only to Jerusalem in sanctity to the Jews, and it took the grand architect of settlements, Ariel Sharon, the very inventor of the Likud, to order and carry out the only two mass expulsions from settlements, first in northern Sinai in 1982, then in Gaza and part of the northern West Bank in 2005.

So it should come as no surprise that perhaps the most diplomatically provocative of the tidal wave of holiday political interviews and analyses, came from a figure of importance in a party often characterized as far-right, Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu.

Israel Hasson, the Syrian-born former deputy director of the Shin Bet security agency, is no stranger to served as a key behind-the-scenes advisor during the Wye, Taba, Hebron and Camp David II peace negotiations.

At the weekend, Maariv made public what it called Yisrael Beiteinu's "red lines" regarding Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's negotiations with Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas, a reference to a position paper prepared by Hasson at Lieberman's request.

Certainly, of all right-wing parties, Yisrael Beiteinu has shown the most consistent openness toward creativity on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At times, that creativity has drawn fire from both sides, as in highly criticized calls by Lieberman and others to redraw the map such that areas of dense Israeli Arab population would be annexed to a future Palestine, in return for concentrated blocs of West Bank settlement to be incorporated into Israel.

While Hasson's position paper refrains from specifics on bedrock issues like Jerusalem and final borders, the document, taken together with the Yisrael Beiteinu platform, allows for a great deal of negotiating latitude on border questions, with territorial exchanges potentially paving the way for such Israeli concessions as ceding certain East Jerusalem Arab neighborhoods to Palestinian control.

At the heart of Hasson's proposal is a radical shift in Israeli thinking regarding the role of the international community in molding and maintaining a local peace. It was long axiomatic in Israeli policymaking that, on the ground at least, the less international involvement the better. The attitude, best enunciated by Ben-Gurion in his distrust and dismissal of the UN, or, in Hebrew, Ha-Oom ("Oom-Shmoom"), has gradually yielded to a grudging consideration of the potential value of international guarantees backed, in the current cliché, by "robust" peacekeeping forces.

It may be no coincidence that an international force is also at the center of a new negotiating plank expected to be put forward by the PA.

According to Maariv's account of the position paper, Hasson advocates a strong international force in the territories, as well as an Israeli-U.S. security alliance and/or acceptance of Israel into NATO, with a NATO security alliance also allowing for protection against a newly nuclear Iran.

In another departure from the traditional Israeli stance, Hasson views the Arab League as taking a potentially "active and dominant" role in an international force in the territories, a force under Quartet and other sponsorship, Maariv reported.

"If these principles are accepted, I do not rule out border corrections between us and the Palestinians, including exchanges of territory and population, because then I can discuss this with the world," Hasson is quoted as saying.

"Under the current path, we'll return at some stage or other to the same disappointing square one. I want to create a reality in which UN Resolutions 242 and 338 are erased because of a new decision, and a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict [working] with the world. It [the conflict] will no longer be in existence.

In Hasson's view, if the Palestinians find themselves unable to implement the agreement, "they will have the world to answer to, not us."

There is no flexibility, however, in Hasson's stance on a Hamas-ruled Gaza. "As long as it continues to be a terrorist entity which rules out peace, it will not be included at all in this accord."

Moreover, Hasson sees the current separation of the West Bank and Gaza as being crucial to the success of such an approach. "We must take the long-term view," Hasson is quoted as saying. Israel must enter into this process as a part of a Western alliance. We must not make another useless move. We must solve two problems. The first, is returning the Palestinian issue to the bosom of the Arab world and the international community, the second is disengaging Gaza from Judea and Samaria. Together, it won't work."

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