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Encountering Peace: What does Netanyahu want?

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Understanding what has been leaked, the PM should move forward with current Palestinian leadership as soon as possible.

The Al-Jazeera leaks on the extent of Palestinian concessions in previous negotiations with Israel are being presented as earth-shattering throughout the Arab world. The Palestinian Negotiations Affairs department's own internal documents demonstrate that the Palestinians have been willing to grant Israel sovereignty over almost all of the neighborhoods in east Jerusalem. The Palestinian leadership headed by President Mahmoud Abbas agreed to the model proposed by former prime minister Ehud Olmert which would grant Israel a role in the Old City of Jerusalem under a special system and even an international body that would have guardianship or control over the Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif.

For anyone who has been intimately involved in the negotiations process over the past two decades, this is nothing new. In fact, most of the concessions "leaked" were actually already made by Yasser Arafat when he accepted the Clinton Parameters (albeit a year and a half too late).

Arafat was even ready to grant Israel sovereignty over Jewish neighborhoods in east Jerusalem during Camp David in July 2000. Israeli leaders have been misleading the public for years on the extent of Palestinian concessions, and it was convenient and comfortable for the Palestinian leadership to not be completely forthcoming on the details with their own public.

But now the truth is out there and the Palestinian leadership, rather than trying to deny it, should face their people and show them to what extent they were/are willing to go to end the

Israeli occupation and bring about Palestinian freedom and statehood.

The Palestinian leadership should be proud that it has fully come to terms with what it will take to end this occupation while maintaining the most basic and essential Palestinian national strategic interests.

IS THERE anything our leaders and people can learn from these new disclosures of negotiations history? We now know how far the Palestinians have been willing to go. Do we have any idea what our side is willing to concede so that Israel's national strategic interests of achieving lasting peace with our neighbors can be materialized?

Do we have any idea what Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu wants? Even with all of my long-term intimate knowledge of the issues and the players, I honestly have no idea what are his thoughts, intentions, or plans are on the future of the two state solution which he officially supports.

The problem here though is not that I have no understanding of where Netanyahu would like to lead the nation, but that no one knows (or at least no one in the public domain) and it appears that Netanyahu himself does not know how to answer the question.

?Netanyahu experts? debate the question and some wager a guess. Members of his own party and government are not even sure. The American administration has been trying to understand Netanyahu's position since he took office. It also fails to get direct answers from the prime minister. The Europeans ? even those who still describe themselves as friends and allies ? fail to see the logic of our government.

Increasing numbers of American and European Jews find themselves without words when asked to defend policies that seem directionless.

Our enemies rejoice in the consistent enlargement of the ?boycott Israel? movement, and are anxiously waiting for Israel to be officially declared a pariah state. And the Palestinians, whose future is on the line as much as Israel's, simply cannot understand how Netanyahu does not see that the viability of the two-state solution is withering away with each passing day.

I am asked how Netanyahu can move ahead on peace with seriousness and determination, given the nature of his coalition and the fragility of coalition politics? This is the same question that US special envoy Dennis Ross was sent by President Barack Obama to ask.

According to a close confidant of Ross, Netanyahu replied that his problems vis-à-vis the Palestinians were more substantive than mere coalition calculations. He did not relate to ideological concerns such as the historic and religious significance of Judea and Samaria, or to the claim of G-d-given rights and deeds to Jerusalem and the Holy Land, but rather focused on specific issues concerning the security risks involved in territorial withdrawal.

The most significant and detailed security risk involves the security of the Jordan River border and the strategic threat the country will face if rockets enter to the east of its center. He is 100 percent correct when he states that a rocket, even a homemade one fired from the hills of Ramallah toward Ben-Gurion Airport could put an end to civil aviation. This is definitely a strategic threat, unlike the same rockets shot at Sderot which, while intolerable, are not a threat to national security.

ALL THE security experts I have spoken with, including several US generals and senior

NATO officers, have said there are real military and security answers that would effectively guarantee security along the Jordan River. The Palestinian leadership, including President Mahmoud Abbas, has said in public and in private, that they are willing to find a way to meet all security demands, including direct IDF involvement in patrols and monitoring missions that would be established based on Israeli security standards.

The recent 'leaks' of Palestinian documents testify to a willingness to meet Israeli security and other political demands. In fact, if Netanyahu fully comprehends the significance of what has been leaked, he should be compelled to move forward with the present Palestinian leadership as soon as possible. Right now the only thing that will guarantee its continued rule is a peace agreement.

In other words, most security experts, including a significant number of current and former IDF officers, Mossad and Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency) officials, believe that the security risks from peace – including a withdrawal from the West Bank based on the June 4, 1967 border with agreed-on territorial swaps in the order of around 3%-4% – pose no real strategic or security threat that cannot be answered.

On the other hand, failure to reach peace raises some real unanswerable existential threats that not only empower extremists locally and regionally, but also put an end to the two-state solution, which is a death blow to the Zionist enterprise.

SO THEN, how do I answer the question? I say that Netanyahu is an intelligent man; his understanding of the issues is not shallow. He knows what a potential agreement looks like. He knows exactly what the parameters of peace are. He knows how far the Palestinians can compromise, and he also has to be aware of the consequences of not reaching an agreement.

That is exactly what is so perplexing about the question.

I say that some Netanyahu experts have said he is bound by the echoing voice of his father, Prof. Benzion Netanyahu, the ultimate right-wing ideological historian.

Those experts say that as long as he is alive, the prime minister will have great difficulty moving forward on peace. He is 100 years old, and these experts say that his son's epiphany will come shortly after he dies. I have no ability to predict such events. What I say is that Netanyahu is likely to undergo the same awakening that has happened to almost every prime minister before him. The weight of responsibility and the real resolvability of this conflict will push him forward. It is only a matter of time – hopefully less time than that remaining for the two-state solution.

This is of course wishful thinking. Never before has the key to peace been so clearly in the hands of one person. That is the striking and sad reality we find ourselves in.

The writer is the co-CEO of the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information (www.ipcri.org [2]) and is in the process of founding the Center for Israeli Progress (<http://israeli-progress.org> [3]).

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