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Meshal's folly

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Haaretz (Opinion)

December 14, 2012 - 1:00am

<http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/meshal-s-folly.premium-1.484785> ^[1]

December 14, 2012

Article Author(s): Henry Siegman

Media Outlet: Haaretz

Article Type: Opinion

Date: December 14, 2012

Source Link(s): <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/meshal-s-folly.premium-1.484785> ^[1]

Just as the UN General Assembly overwhelmingly recognized Palestine as a state in the occupied territories beyond Israel's pre-1967 borders, providing new hope and encouragement to those who have not given up on the struggle for a Palestinian state living in peace alongside the State of Israel; and as major European countries condemned in unprecedentedly strong terms Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's decision to enlarge the settlement project in the Jerusalem area and elsewhere, a move that would prevent such a two-state outcome, Hamas' political bureau chief Khaled Meshal last weekend called for the elimination of the State of Israel. Israelis who have been seeking to prevent a Palestinian state in any part of the land could not have hoped for a better gift from Hamas.

The UN General Assembly's action, as well as the European response to Israel's construction plans in the E-1 corridor and throughout the West Bank, held out the rare promise of a possible pushback by Western democracies to Jerusalem's intentions to put paid to the two-state solution. But Meshal's rant has enabled the most reactionary forces in Israel, and their U.S. supporters, to discredit an emerging international consensus that Netanyahu's deceptions and predations have gone too far. It has also cut the ground out from under any prospects that may have existed for the emergence in next month's election of a coalition of pro-peace forces that might have prevented Netanyahu's return to power.

That it was Meshal who engaged in this diatribe is particularly dispiriting, for he has consistently advocated far more moderate views, including Hamas' acceptance of a two-state peace accord that might be reached between Israel and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, if it were approved in a Palestinian referendum. He also supported the cessation of all violent resistance against Israel if its government were to accept the principle of a Palestinian state based on the pre-1967 borders.

But the self-righteous moral outrage from Israel's government that greeted Meshal's recent speech also illustrates dramatically Israel's and the world's double standard, which is the real cause of the failure of every previous peace initiative. For Meshal's declaration followed Netanyahu's announcement that he is going forward with major new construction in the E-1 corridor, as well as enlargement of settlements throughout the occupied territories - in other words, that Israel is putting an end to the possibility of Palestinian statehood.

Both Netanyahu and Meshal were calling for politicide - the elimination of a state and the dispossession, if not worse, of its people. The difference between them, however, is that everyone knows Netanyahu has every intention of achieving his goal, and indeed may already have done so, but even Hamas' leaders would have settled for a state within the 1967 borders.

Israelis were apoplectic that Meshal omitted from his speech any mention of Jews in the democratic Palestinian paradise he envisions. Has anyone ever heard Netanyahu speak about the presence of Arabs in Israel's settlements in the territories? The settlements are in fact Arab-rein. Indeed, a number of Netanyahu's fellow ministers have endorsed calls by members of the rabbinate to landlords not to rent to Arabs in Jewish neighborhoods within the State of Israel.

This prevailing double standard could not have been exposed more blatantly (if unintentionally) than it was by columnist Dan Margalit in *Israel Hayom*, where he wrote, on December 10, with a blinding lack of self-awareness, that Palestinians, not Israel, are the main obstacle to peace. He accused "leftists" who claim otherwise of "overlook[ing] the fact that there is no reason to believe that Abu Mazen [Mahmoud Abbas] - and certainly Khaled Meshal and Ismail Haniyeh - advocates a solution whereby the disputed land is partitioned" [emphasis added].

The entire West Bank, which the UN Partition Plan of 1947 recognized as the legitimate patrimony of Palestine's Arab population (half of which was subsequently annexed by Israel in its War of Independence, leaving the minority Jewish population with 78 percent of Palestine, 50 percent more than what the UN plan allotted to the Jewish state) is now considered by Netanyahu and his government not as "occupied" territory but as "disputed" territory, to which the Jews have as much a claim as do its Arab inhabitants. But it is Palestinians who are seen in Israel - and not just by its demented "hilltop youth" - as the obstacles to peace.

None of this justifies Meshal's reckless incitement, nor Hamas' rockets aimed at civilian targets. Perhaps his fiery rhetoric serves Meshal's latest political ambitions, but above all it serves those whose goal is the permanent disenfranchisement and dispossession of the Palestinian people. Yet when that goal is for all practical purposes accepted by most Israelis, who in all likelihood will be electing Netanyahu for another term, they should not be surprised if their victims respond in kind.

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