



MIDDLE EAST NORTH AFRICA

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose! Israel - Palestine

Articles and reflections by Dr. Harry Hagopian

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It is almost like one of those fairy tales that could either end up happily ... or else unhappily! But for now at least, the new comet of Israeli politics and fresh kingmaker for its struggling coalitions is no other than the journalist and leader of *Yesh Atid* (There is a Future) Ya'ir Lapid. The blandishments have already started coming his way and - not unexpectedly - the caretaker Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is the principal magus who is offering gifts and enticements.

So now that the electoral dust has settled a tad, it is becoming quite clear that the Netanyahu-Liebermann - or to put it otherwise, the *Likud-Yisrael Beiteinu* - leaders were ostensibly so confident that it did not dawn upon them that their voters were drifting away from their grasp well before those ballot boxes started filling up. And in the absence of an astute *Avoda* (Labour) party leader - incidentally another journalist - who was committing sophomoric political lapses, voters were eyeing Ya'ir Lapid or Naftali Bennett and his *Bayit Yehudi* (The Jewish Home) - but clearly more so the former than the latter now that we have scanned the electoral results, expressed our surprise and then digested them.

Netanyahu has indubitably been left with a somewhat bloodied nose - there is no more elegant way of putting this - and it happened largely because he has been too busy courting the fringes of Israeli politics, including the ultra-orthodox constituencies and overindulged settlers, that he ignored the centre ground and the middle classes who were hurting as a result of economic hardships and increasing isolation. So put together such misguided political choices alongside his rejection of any resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and then couple it with the unrelenting attacks against him by some of the powerful and outspoken Israeli media, and it becomes slightly easier to fathom why he is now fighting for his survival whereas he could well have been a king himself if he had only played his political cards better.

But this brings me back to the kingmaker. Even though I only know Lapid from television, I would still humbly admonish him to be prudent and not to rush into any luring offers made to him. At the moment, Lapid is an intemperate politician-to-be but he is certainly no left-wing peace activist, nor are his instincts in my opinion closely identifiable with the Left inasmuch as such a concept exists in Israel today. He campaigned on an ailing economy, on the unfair draft law (against army exemptions on religious grounds) and on the way ultra-orthodox parties have blackmailed almost every government with their siphoning financial demands lest they allow it to lose its parliamentary vote of confidence.

However, Lapid is now an MK, Member of Parliament, and he needs to do more in order to move away from journalism and into statesmanship. This is not a question of lofty ethics but rather a hardnosed requirement for his survival and longer-term impact on Israeli politics. After all, there are several examples of parties that have grabbed the attention of the public for one season only to become proverbial flashes in the pan and fritter away before the next elections. He should make his ironclad deals before entering into any coalition or else he could be checkmated at almost every turn.

So what does the kingmaker have to focus on in his negotiations and what should he demand of a future government?

For a start, Lapid should not start watering down his key positions on the economy or the religious parties but fight hard for his demands. Moreover, he should remind the prime minister that the Iran and Israel-Palestine

conflicts are still very dry political tinderboxes for Israel let alone for the region. As such, he should insist that the P5+1 policies of the US Administration be given ample time to bear fruit before frothing at the mouth about attacking Iranian nuclear facilities - something that Israel cannot pull off on its own but would require American assistance. After all, and as Hussein Ibish, Senior Fellow at the American Task Force on Palestine in Washington DC, opined recently, the second-term Obama Administration would consist of an 'Iran cabinet' that should be given the chance to deal with this nuclear standoff.

Insofar as Israel-Palestine is concerned, Lapid should insist upon a more centrist view that would stop the unremitting colonisation of Palestinian lands and encourage saving the last gasp of the two-state solution before the whole dream for peace falls into desuetude and we are left with a political vacuum that will only turn nastier, more violent, bloodier and inimical with the stability of Israel let alone of a whole MENA region in a state of flux. After all, many of the parliamentary members of his own new party are themselves quite open to the two-state solution. Besides, did King Abdullah II of Jordan not warn the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Davos earlier this month that the window for such a solution cannot outlive President Obama? And are the facts on the ground not similarly borne day-in-day-out by *B'Tselem* (The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories) and other organisations?

Will Ya'ir Lapid exhibit political *chutzpah* along with sober and strategic long-sightedness? Will he acknowledge reality rather than spin or spurn it - namely that it is in Israeli as much as Palestinian interests to decolonise the occupied territories rather than despoil a whole people and their lands? Will he perchance recall the words of Benjamin Disraeli, a former British Conservative Prime Minister, who averred that "justice is truth in action" and in so doing help midwife the creation of a viable Palestinian state next to Israel? Or will it sadly be a case of *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* whereby self-interested instincts kick in and 'the same old same old' untruths boomerang in all our faces again?

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