



THE MIDDLE EAST

SETTLEMENTS & PEACE: AN OXYMORON?

by Dr. Harry Hagopian
epektasis.net

Will he, or won't he? Over the past few weeks and months, many of us have focused with almost singular dedication over this question! I am referring of course to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's decision regarding a further three-month extension to the moratorium on the construction of Jewish-only Israeli settlements on Palestinian occupied land.

During this suspenseful period, the Israeli prime minister has been reassuring everyone willing to trust him of his staunch commitment to peace with the Palestinians whilst with the same breath refusing to halt settlement-building as a pre-requisite for the resumption of negotiations with Palestinians. At a time when Israel already has over 300,000 settlers in the West Bank, and with new settlement projects in Jerusalem being approved week-in-week-out, he also claims that he cannot possibly take another pause in building in order to test whether the Palestinian government of PNA President Mahmoud Abbas - incidentally a man many Israeli politicians had said is the best Palestinian security partner ever for Israel - can forge a safe two-state deal.

Moreover, Netanyahu seems to be imposing his will not only on Palestinians or Arab regimes, or even on the flaccid European partners let alone its Quartet envoy, but rather on the US Administration - and particularly President Barack Obama who started his presidency by demanding a full freeze of settlements but has now significantly dulled all his erstwhile expectations. After a recent marathon eight-hour session with the empowered Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and despite being promised a superfluity of inducements, Netanyahu still declines to reverse his position and makes it axiomatic to the US Administration that Israel wants land and settlements much more than peace. As such, he risks never forging a two-state deal and in the process will also have to permanently absorb the 2.5 million Palestinian Arab Israelis and eventually forfeit his Jewish majority.

Sadly, all those political manoeuvres are sterile and lack both good faith and good will. The ninety-day moratorium that is being negotiated with high-stakes tenacity is actually no more than one starting point for the much bigger final-status issues that include inter alia borders, Jerusalem and refugees. After all, we know that the most likely solution to the settlements would entail having several large West Bank settlement blocks kept within Israel, and Israel then exchanging commensurate swathes of land with Palestinians to compensate for those withheld territories. Drawing the exact border lines could be left for a later stage in the negotiations, but an agreement on the future shape of a state would make the settlements recede in importance as both parties and their facilitators would then know which geography maps should apply for the final resolution of the conflict. Besides, the point of the extension would allow the negotiations to gain enough traction to proceed without further disruption.

I have often written over many years - and certainly since 2001 when the ongoing negotiations broke down in earnest - that the parameters for the resolution of this conflict are quite clear and that they should blend together the remarkable Arab Initiative of 2002 (that is still on the negotiating table) with the Clinton Parameters that were either explicitly or implicitly agreed in Taba at the end of Prime Minister Ehud Barak's tumultuous tenure. But a land-grab mentality, coupled with an ideology that is exclusive and expansionist as well as a fear of upsetting religious and secular coalition partners, means that we are witnessing a greedily disingenuous Israeli side that is loath to any concessions and one that is alas being aided and abetted by third parties.

Today, it is imperative that Israel undergoes at long last a phase of self-criticism, realises that occupation is eventually corrosive in moral and practical terms and recognises that its long-term security exacts compromise. In fact, Palestinians - in the policies pursued by Dr Salam Fayyad, their acting prime minister - have been steadfastly building the security and financial cornerstones for a viable [hopefully sovereign and contiguous] future state. So if Israel truly wishes to end this conflict, let alone institute long-term peace for its own citizens as well as for the whole region, the opportunity is still staring it in the face. But if it continues its prevarications and resorts to other pretexts ranging from Iran to Hizbullah and Hamas (whether such pretexts are verily plausible or not) to checkmate this peace equation and forestall the inevitable moment when it will have to submit to compromise, then it is clear that the levels of tension would continue to rise dramatically and boomerang against the whole region - including Israel that at times thinks of itself as impregnable. But impregnable it is not, as witnessed in 2006 in southern Lebanon, nor is it invincible when its own moral standing slips lower and lower in many political imaginations.

Given the recent deluge of WikiLeaks disclosures, and the centrality of Iran in the political and military concerns of many regional and global powers, I wish there would also have been some clearer indication in those leaked despatches of the discussions involving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After all, what are the disparities between public and private truths here?

It is clear there are indigenous rights that have been violated and justice that has been mauled by an Israeli occupier squatting on Arab lands. So if Netanyahu truly seeks peace, stability and prosperity, he should focus on win-win scenarios that would inevitably compel him to choose between the oxymora of Israeli settlements versus a peace settlement. Or as I also read in a recent op-ed, he should admit that the Land of Israel and the State of Israel could well be incompatible. But ... will he?

© hbv-H @ 30 November 2010