

Netanyahu's Oslo: peace in the slow lane

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*John Strawson looks at the prospects for the
Palestinian state.*

In November 1997, two years after the assassination of prime minister Yitzhak Rabin by a right-wing Jew, posters appeared in Jerusalem depicting the current prime minister Benjamin ('Bibi') Netanyahu wearing the keffiyeh scarf, so loved by Yasser Arafat. The message was clear - Benjamin Netanyahu had joined Yitzhak Rabin as a traitor in the eyes of a section of the Israeli right. Netanyahu's crime was to be planning to withdraw from another small tract of land in the occupied West Bank in line with Oslo peace accords with the Palestinians. While Netanyahu had been elected prime minister with the support of the right in May 1996 he had not been elected on a specifically anti-Oslo ticket. While he was no Rabin, Netanyahu has his own version of the famous agreement, which he has been slowly revealing to both the Palestinians and to his own electorate. Neither side are pleased with what they see, but Netanyahu does indeed have his own Oslo blueprint.

The Oslo agreement

When the Declaration of Principles (as the Oslo agreement is officially known¹) was signed between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasir Arafat on the White House lawn September 13 1993, the intention was to create a framework for negotiations between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) which would

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lead to the end of the conflict. The Oslo accords were revolutionary in providing for the mutual recognition of the State of Israel and the PLO, ending thirty years of mutual denial. The agreement created a three stage process, first a transfer of powers from the Israeli occupation to the Palestinians in undefined territories in Gaza and the Jericho Area, then further Israeli withdrawals and Palestinian elections and finally negotiations which would clarify among other issues 'borders.' While the agreement broadly talked of the legitimate rights of both Palestinians and Israelis, the intention to discuss 'borders' appeared as code for self-determination. At the heart of Oslo was Israeli withdrawal from occupied Palestinian land. As such it struck a blow at the so-called 'national camp' of Israeli politics who viewed the Israeli 1967 occupation of the West Bank as a basis for territorial expansion of the state. Despite the popularity of the agreement amongst most Israelis, in large sections of the right it was seen as betrayal.

Netanyahu, who had become leader of the opposition Likud Party in March 1993, initially opposed Oslo, and over the first years of its implementation was even seen in demonstrations against it. He even went along silently as others denounced Yitzhak Rabin as a traitor. Netanyahu was preparing himself for the first direct elections of an Israeli prime minister which were due in 1996. He realised more than the governing Labour-Meretz coalition that these new elections would be dependent on every single vote and that meant building a political coalition beyond the confines of the Israeli party system. Netanyahu set out to woo the extreme right, the religious constituency, the moderate secular right and the centrist voters who wanted Oslo but who worried about weakening Israel by making too many concessions or moving too quickly. By the time of Rabin's assassination in November 1995 Bibi was ahead in the opinion polls.

By the time of the May 1996 elections, Shimon Peres, Rabin's successor, was busy casting himself in the role of military leader, which was his answer

1. There is no one Oslo agreement as such but four key texts: Israel-Palestine Liberation Organisation: Declaration on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, 13 September 1993 ('Oslo'); Agreement on the Gaza Strip and the Jericho Area, 4 May 1993 (the 'Cairo Agreement'); Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, 28 September 1995 ('Oslo 2'); Agreement on Hebron and the Note for the Record, January 1997- For an Israeli-Palestin academic exchange on the Oslo agreements, see Eugene Cotran and Chibli Mallat (eds), *The Arab-Israeli Accords: Legal Perspectives*, Kluwer International Law, 1996.

to the Hamas suicide bombings in the streets of Israel's cities and to the Lebanese Hizbollah's attacks on the northern border. Peres, the man who had coined the phrase 'New Middle East', lost his script during the election and narrowly lost the election to Netanyahu. Bibi had quietly moved to the political centre after Rabin's assassination and refused to denounce Oslo; even more deftly his own manifesto promised to maintain 'all Israel's international agreements'. In interviews he promised that he would meet Arafat 'if it were in the interest of Israel's security'. He even changed track with his electoral slogan 'peace with security' - having assured himself of the religious vote and the right, Netanyahu went towards the centre. Whereas the Likud party declined in its Knesset (Parliament) vote and seats, Netanyahu, the candidate for the prime minister, won by a margin on 27,000 votes, about one half of one per cent.

Bibi's solution

Once in power Netanyahu set about reorganising the approach to the Palestinians. The Israeli left and many outside commentators saw him as the straight anti-Oslo candidate and missed the fact that he had moved towards combining Oslo with his own ideas about the future of Israel, which he advanced in his book, *A Place Amongst the Nations: Israel and the World*.² Unlike the most of the right in Israel, Netanyahu understood that Oslo could not be unravelled as it had gone too far in establishing Palestinian facts on the ground. The establishment of the Palestinian Authority and the withdrawal of Israeli jurisdiction from the main population centres meant that the new Israeli prime minister confronted a half-born Palestinian state. Netanyahu thus set out on the road of containing this growing entity and ensuring that if a Palestinian state went to full term it would be the smallest and weakest possible.

In his book, Netanyahu had spelt out his ideas on autonomy for the Palestinians. 'There is no reason,' he writes 'why every lonely cluster of Arab houses should need to claim autonomy over the entire mountain on which it is perched. Thus *autonomy is primarily applicable to urban centres* in which an Arab population can make decisions on day to day life' (p 352).

2. Benjamin Netanyahu, *A Place Amongst the Nations: Israel and the World*, Bantam Press, 1993.

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Netanyahu sees the Arab population as separate from the land on which they live. This continues the Zionist myth that the Palestinian population is unattached to the land on which they live both emotionally and legally. In this story the Palestinians do not have the identity of a normal people but possess a transitory and itinerant character.

The peculiar identity of the Palestinians becomes a legitimating basis for the appropriation of their land and the establishment of Israeli settlements on it. If the Palestinians can be seen as separate from their land, autonomy becomes a matter of moving a population into the most convenient units for Israeli purposes. For Netanyahu this is underscored by the inherent terrorist threat which is posed by the Palestinians: 'To combat terrorism, Israeli military and security forces must have access to every part of the territory, including the urban centres from which the terrorists may strike and to which they may return for safe haven'. In this account the idea of autonomy is extremely limited and is based on the stereotype of an entire people as terrorists.

Netanyahu's vision of the future of the Palestinians is based on locating the people in tiny territories and subject to Israeli security control. He argues that:

It would be appropriate, therefore, to develop a system of four self-managing Arab counties: Jenin, Nablus, Ramallah and Hebron. Each of these counties comprise a city and the small towns and villages adjacent to it. Together these counties encompass the great majority of the West Bank's Arab population, and they take up no more than one fifth of the land (p353).

This convenient discovery that most Palestinians live in only about 20 per cent of the West Bank provides the basis for the territorial limitation, in an argument that is similar in tone to the old South African apartheid regime's view that the African population naturally belonged in the 'homeland' which then comprised some 13 per cent of South Africa. However, Netanyahu is willing to go further than Verwoerd as he speculates that 'if the Arabs were to demonstrate clearly that they had adopted a genuine peacetime footing, Israel could consider offering citizenship to the Arab population of Judea and Samaria at the end of a twenty year cooling off period.'

Netanyahu in office

Many journalists and analysts in the international media appeared to have missed reading this book which was published in the same year that Netanyahu became the leader of the Likud. Among many media commentaries it has been conventional wisdom to speculate that the problem with Netanyahu is that he does not know what to do with the peace process.³ However, a reading of his book is an instructive backdrop to his pronouncements and practices in office. Far from drifting, Netanyahu is engaged in implementing a well thought out plan. He has made this clear in a number of interviews and speeches where he explains that his policy towards the Palestinians is to 'lower expectations'.

In the run up to the May 1996 elections, the result of secret meetings between Labour Cabinet Minister Yossi Beilin and Palestinian negotiator Abu Mazen, including a map detailing the final settlement, were leaked to the press. Both have subsequently denied they had such a map, but few would believe that story. Whether the map was true or not, it seemed a likely outcome of the Oslo process and envisaged that some 90 per cent of the West Bank would be returned to the Palestinians. There would be some territorial adjustments, with about 6 per cent of the West Bank, with the heaviest Israeli settlements (the Etzion bloc South of Jerusalem), being annexed to Israel, and a similar sized tract of desert in the Negev adjacent to Gaza being turned over to the Palestinians. Jerusalem would have remained in Israeli hands, although Palestinians would manage the Islamic holy places, and an area on the edge of the city, Abu Dis, could become the capital of a Palestinian state. The proposal, although falling short of the return of all territory occupied in 1967, was very close, and, most significant of all, it offered the prospect of an independent Palestinian state as the outcome of the peace process. Although this solution had been sought by the international community since the United Nations General Assembly partition resolution 181, in 1947, and reaffirmed in sense in 1967 (in Security Council resolution 242), it was revolutionary for Israeli public opinion. For Netanyahu it represented a major challenge to his colonial-type solution. What concerned him was that Palestinian expectations had been raised to the point that a Palestinian state was on the verge of being achieved.

3. See for example Serge Schmemmann, 'Outside In', *New York Times Magazine*, 23 November 1997.

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In an interview for the popular Israeli TV talk show PopPolitika, Netanyahu argued that he had changed these expectations: 'the most important thing that we did, which gives hope that real peace will be found with the Palestinians, is to lower expectations.'⁴ In clarification of this position he explained that he was 'not prepared to accept Palestinian sovereignty... A Palestinian or Arab state here, in the heart of our country, means an Arab army, alliances with Arab countries and dangers.' However he supports the proposition that Palestinians should be able to run their own lives 'without any intervention on our part'. 'I am prepared to give them many powers, but not in areas that can threaten the existence of my country.' In a latter speech in the United States, Netanyahu explained what this meant:

I have not drawn any precise maps to define what we have in mind for an agreement with the Palestinians. But I do know that I represent a very broad national consensus when I declare that the Jordan Valley must be Israel's strategic border, that Israel will not give up control of airspace and water resources, that it must keep strategic zones that it considers vital; that it will not allow a Palestinian army equipped with heavy weapons or non-conventional arms to form West of the Jordan, and, above all, that Jerusalem will stay the undivided capital of Israel for ever."

Netanyahu's claim that he has no map is inconsistent both with his careful drawing of a geographical picture of the territory of the West Bank that Israel will require, and the much publicised map which has appeared in the press since the summer of 1997- Indeed in his July TV interview he was much less coy about the existence of a map and referred to it as the Allon-plus map'. General Allon had produced a plan for Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank in the 1970s, which provided for Israeli control of the Jordan Valley area dividing Israel from Jordan as well as other strategic positions. Netanyahu has worked on this map which was leaked to the press and had

4- See Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Special Interview on Israeli Television, 28 July 1997 *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. XXVII, No 1 (Autumn 1997) p 150.

5. Address by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the Council of Jewish Federations General Assembly in Indianapolis, Prime Minister's Reports, Vol. 1 No. 11 (17 November 1997), Prime Minister's Office. Israel.

been widely published. It conforms very largely to Netanyahu's 1993 thoughts on the matter. It divides the West Bank into four areas, three of which are Palestinian, separated from each other - one stretching from Bethlehem to south of Hebron, the Jericho area, and a Northern zone from Ramallah in the south to Jenin in the North. These three Palestinian zones are intersected by a large Israeli one, which includes occupied East Jerusalem, the Jordan Valley and Judean Desert. The Israeli zone would include nearly all the Israeli settlements, built illegally since 1967, with a combined population, excluding East Jerusalem, of 160,000.

Netanyahu's map contains a narrative which excludes the creation of a contiguous Palestinian territory' on which a state could be created. By December 1997 a veritable battle of the maps appeared to have broken out in the Cabinet, with Foreign Minister Levy, Defence Minister Mordechai and Infrastructure Minister Sharon all waving their own versions. However, despite small differences, the maps add up to a small Palestine subject to Israeli security and economic interests.⁶

The current proposals differ in some important respects from those contained in the 1993 book; in particular the proportion of the West Bank ceded to the Palestinians amounts to about 40 per cent and in the place of four counties with self-management there are now three zones, created in the political context of Oslo. Netanyahu's adjustment has been a pragmatic response to the political changes that have been brought about since the signing of the Declaration of Principles in 1993. Despite widespread Palestinian suspicion about the accords, the creation of the Palestinian Authority has drastically changed the situation on the ground. Today the Palestinian Authority is based on the democratic elections held in January 1996 which saw the election of the 88 seat Palestinian Legislative Council and the President of the Authority. This has legitimised the existence of Palestinian political and judicial authorities in the eyes of the Palestinians and the international community. The Authority already runs the main governmental policies for 99 per cent of Palestinians, and it exercises actual jurisdiction over most of the

6. The publication of an apparently common map in the Israeli press makes this very clear, with three areas of the West Bank allocated to the Palestinians, *see Jerusalem Post*, 4 December 1997.

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Gaza strip (about 70 per cent) and about 4 per cent of the West Bank. In the latter areas the Authority runs the courts and security apparatus, effectively the Palestinian police and army, a force of some 40,000. In a sense, a form of Palestinian state has already come into existence, a fact symbolised by the powers of the Palestinian Authority to issue internationally recognized passports.⁷ The adoption of the Basic Law by the Palestinian Legislative Council is yet another indication of the emergence of the features of a state. These are facts which Netanyahu and the Israeli right wing know they cannot roll back, but think that they can contain.

It has been this that has spurred Netanyahu, ironically, to argue that the Oslo peace process is going too slowly and that he wants to proceed to the permanent status negotiations. In the time—frame established in the Interim Agreement signed in 1995, in the period after the Palestinian elections the Israelis were committed to three further redeployments from the West Bank, leading up to the permanent status negotiations. Under the previous government, it is quite clear that the Palestinian leadership assumed that these further redeployments would leave between 70-80 per cent of the West Bank in the hands of the Palestinians by the time they came to discuss the status of the Palestinian entity, its borders, Jerusalem, settlements and the refugees. This has been one of the expectations that Netanyahu wants to lower drastically. He does not really want to make any serious withdrawal from territory before the final agreement, because his final offer is, as his map indicates, extremely meagre. His first proposal for redeployment amounted to 2.5 per cent of the West Bank. This the Palestinians refused, apparently with the blessing of the Clinton Administration. In November 1997 Netanyahu forced his reluctant cabinet to agree to a further redeployment. This is undoubtedly the result of intense pressure by the Americans who have become irritated by Netanyahu's refusal to push ahead with the agreement. Thus while Arafat seeks meaningful redeployments, Netanyahu wants small ones, so that he can enter the final discussions with the Palestinians in control of perhaps 20 per cent of the West Bank.

Netanyahu and his advisers, in particular the new Israeli UN ambassador

7. See John Whitbeck, 'The Palestinian State Exists', *Palestine-Israel Journal* Vol. III, No. 2, Spring 1996.

Dore Gold and his press chief David Bar Ilan, are attempting to force Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian negotiators into accepting tiny tracts of land with limited powers. Under this plan they play around with the question of whether it would amount to a state or not. In December 1996 David Bar Ilan gave a press briefing in which he referred to a Palestinian entity possessing the powers of Puerto Rico or Andorra. He was apparently horrified to learn that Andorra is now a fully-fledged member of the United Nations. Nevertheless the Israeli right has grasped that Palestinian self-government is unstoppable and they need to get ahead of the momentum in order to shape it. As a result they have begun to speak of the possibility of a state-minus-sovereignty. By this they mean a state without full powers over international relations and in particular barred from making alliances with other Arab states, and naturally a demilitarised entity. It has also become clear, with the demands for the control of vital natural resources, such as water, that they envisage a Palestine economically dependent on Israel. The critical question therefore arises as to whether this policy has any chance.

Obstacles

There are three obstacles to Netanyahu's Oslo - the Palestinians, the American Administration and Israeli politics. The Palestinian leadership has already taken a great risk in negotiating the Accords. The support for the peace process amongst Palestinians has been high at times of momentum, but since the election of Netanyahu has declined. Arafat faces a strong opposition, in particular from the Islamist forces, most obviously from Hamas. In addition, there are the secular and leftist forces which have already rejected Oslo. He cannot afford to be seen to give in to a plan which would reduce Palestine to a permanent local authority with a flag and a passport. This was the outcome predicted by Edward Said, among other opponents of Oslo, at the very beginning.⁸ It is for this reason that Arafat and Saeb Erekat his chief negotiator have been very careful to organise political campaigns against all settlements, and in particular on Jerusalem, as a way of demonstrating their radical credentials to the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. A more difficult

8. See Edward Said, 'The Morning After', in Edward Said, *Peace and its Discontents*, Vintage 1995.

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problem for them is the Palestinian Diaspora, particularly the refugees who have felt excluded by the agreement and who are certainly not part of Netanyahu's solution. Arafat has in fact shown no inclination to deal with Netanyahu and has refused the offer of going straight to the permanent status negotiations. He has, it would appear, read Netanyahu's book.

'Israel is of little importance to the America of the new world order'

The American administration was alarmed by the election of Netanyahu and had publicly backed his opponent, Shimon Peres. In the Autumn of 1997 this alarm turned to hostility, culminating in Bill Clinton's refusal to meet Netanyahu when he visited the United States. Clinton had apparently been outraged by Netanyahu's settlement building activity in Jerusalem, especially the Har Homa project, but had also been startled by the bungled attempt to kill the Amman Hamas spokesperson Masha'al, just days before the sensitive Jordanian elections. In November, Clinton also became acutely aware that perceived closeness to Israel had undermined support in the Arab world for the US policy towards Iraq. This latter event also demonstrates Israel's vulnerability now that the cold war is over and it is no longer a 'front line' state. In reality Israel is of little importance to the America of the new world order. More and more it is becoming an irritant, something which former US Secretary of State James Baker III had famously used expletives about in 1990. The Clinton administration is probably on the verge of changing its policy on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and could well opt for the creation of a Palestinian state in the next year, drastically undermining Netanyahu's project.

Israeli politics has been transformed by the innovation of directly electing the prime minister. It has focused power in the hands of the prime minister and at the same time increased the power of smaller political parties. In order to get a majority for his government in the Knesset, Netanyahu was forced to put together a coalition involving his own Likud Party, the three religious parties, one centrist force, and Natan Sharansky's Russian migrants' party. Of this group of 68 members of Knesset, Netanyahu only has the support of 22 Likud MPs (10 others are in alliance with Likud but organise as two public factions). Netanyahu's government is fraught with factional rivalries and conflicting agendas, on which the peace process is only one issue. Nevertheless,

it was this government which withdrew from most of Hebron, crossing a red line in the politics of the 'national camp' by withdrawing from the land of Israel. Despite this crossing of the rubicon the government survived. However, opponents of Netanyahu on the right might yet bring him down. He has an ally in Ariel Sharon, the Minister of National Infrastructure (otherwise known as the Butcher of Beirut), who recognised in the early days of Oslo that 'despite the fact that Israel does not want it, a Palestinian state is coming into existence'.⁹ Undoubtedly, if Netanyahu survives he and Sharon will work together to contain this coming Palestinian state. However, in Israeli politics the dynamics can change at any moment, and it would be unwise to predict the survival or extinction of any politician.

It is also a challenge to the left, Labour, Meretz and Peace Now! to campaign for their own political vision of peace in the Middle East. With Ehud Barak, Labour's leader, now leading Netanyahu 12 per cent in the opinion polls, it is high time he started to campaign against Netanyahu rather than campaigning like him. Barak's main problem is that he has no real vision of what the peace process might bring the Middle East, unlike his predecessor Shimon Peres. Peres had written about this in his book, *The New Middle East*, published in the same year as Netanyahu's work.¹⁰ In it Peres had speculated about building a close, 'benelux-like' relationship between the Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians, built on open borders and thus the free movement of capital and people. Barak is much more cautious and is terrified of going ahead of public opinion. Barak, according to the journalist Gideon Samat, is rather 'turning himself and his party into something that closely resembles the Likud and its leader'."

Peace Now! has awoken from the shock of Netanyahu's election and has begun to mobilise again. Barak is being drawn into its wake and this could well stiffen his resolve against both Netanyahu and his plans. The massive peace demonstrations in Tel Aviv in September and on the anniversary of Rabin's assassination in November indicate that there is another Israel, which could assert itself against Netanyahu.

9. *Jerusalem Post*, 27 November 1997.

10. Shimon Peres, *The New Middle East*, Element 1993.

11. *Ha'aretz*, English edition, 10 December 1997.

The peace threat to Jewish identity

Netanyahu's survival and his plan for the smallest and weakest Palestinian state possible is the result of the maturing of the Jewish political culture of the twentieth century. Netanyahu represents the hesitancy amongst many Jews in Israel and the Diaspora to embrace the peace process with the Palestinians. It is not so much the fear of the threat of the Palestinians or the Arab world as the fear of losing that threat. For much of this miserable century Jews have constituted their identity through the survival of threats to their existence - the Russian pogroms, the shoah, the threats to destroy Israel. The struggle to survive against the enemy has been a fundamental tenet of Jewish consciousness. For the past fifty years, the image of the Jews surrounded by enemies in Israel, and the mobilisation of support for them by the Diaspora, has underlined the Jewish sense of identity. Peace is a threat to Jewish identity as it removes the Other whose threats give it being. Netanyahu's careful honing of the issue of security is not just a political mantra but also fulfills a psychological need. In a strange way it creates a sense of comfort and of home. This is also linked to the attempt to project this tiny Palestinian state. The Palestinians have been constructed as mortal enemies who cannot be treated like other human beings. As Netanyahu reveals in his book, they will use territory not for self-determination but as a basis for terrorist attacks. If they have too much territory they will encourage the refugees to settle them and begin to pressure Israel's existence. The thought of seeing the Palestinians as ordinary neighbours, as Shimon Peres imagined in his book *The New Middle East*, is in this scenario a little threatening.

Benjamin Netanyahu has been forced to begin to speak the language of Oslo. As such he peppers his speeches with talk about each side having to honour its commitments. He will berate the Palestinians with allegations about not cracking down on terrorism, not extraditing terrorists or not altering the Palestinian Covenant. In a strange way this marks a huge leap from the days when all existence of the Palestinians was denied as an article of Zionist faith. The Palestinians have now been constituted in Zionist ideology, even on the right. The Israeli left, Labour, Meretz and Peace Now! have the task of transforming the Palestinians in Israeli discourse into a people possessed of their own inherent rights, like all other peoples. Liberating the Jews from the need to fear the threat to their existence will require a political fight to liberate the Palestinians from Israeli occupation - and colonial imagery.