

RUSH!

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GIVE NETANYAHU A CHANCE

Prime Minister-elect Binyamin Netanyahu's stunning victory in Israel's May 29 elections has jolted Washington. The conventional wisdom holds that Netanyahu's election spells trouble for the Arab-Israeli peace process and inevitably will generate increased frictions in Israel's relations with the Palestinians, neighboring Arab states, and the United States. This is not necessarily so. In fact, the Clinton Administration can help make sure that this does not happen by reformulating its peace strategy to adjust to the new situation in Israel.

Contrary to the prevailing opinion in the American media, which often demonized Netanyahu's Likud Party, the Israeli elections were not a referendum on Arab-Israeli peace. By electing Netanyahu, Israelis did not vote against peace, they voted for security. The Israeli public has grown increasingly embittered in recent months by the deteriorating personal security situation. Sadly, the 217 Israelis killed by terrorists since the September 1993 Israeli-Palestinian accord exceeds the 209 killed in the entire decade before the accord was signed on the White House lawn. Clearly, the peace negotiations launched by the Yitzhak Rabin-Shimon Peres government failed to safeguard Israeli security against terrorist attack. If the prevailing trends had continued, support for the peace talks inside Israel would have eroded to such an extent that they would have been doomed to failure.

Netanyahu pragmatically has pledged to continue the peace negotiations. But instead of obsessively advancing the "peace process," he has spoken of making progress on the "peace and security process." Netanyahu declared that the Likud would not have signed the 1993 Oslo agreement with the Palestine Liberation Organization, but he has accepted it as a diplomatic *fait accompli* that must be respected as long as the Palestinians live up to their commitments under the agreement. He is expected to be much more forceful than his predecessors in insisting on total Palestinian compliance with the interim agreements negotiated thus far. In particular, he has expressed great dissatisfaction with the Palestinian Authority's failure to crack down systematically on terrorists and to extradite terrorists that have murdered Israelis.

The precise outlines of Netanyahu's policies will not become clear until he forms a government and drafts a coalition agreement that spells out government policy on critical issues. The Prime Minister-elect hopes to complete this process and present his cabinet to the new parliament when it convenes on June 17. The Likud's 32 parliamentary seats leave it 29 seats short of a majority in the 120-seat Knesset. This means Netanyahu will have to strike deals with at least four other political parties to bring them into a governing coalition, a political necessity that will substantially shape the policies of his government.

During the election campaign Netanyahu promised two major changes in policy toward the West Bank and Gaza: He would revive the settlement program frozen by the Rabin-Peres government and he will give the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) full freedom of action in combating terrorism inside autonomous Palestinian areas. Each of these policies could disrupt the negotiations if pursued too vigorously, but if pursued judiciously may become a useful bargaining chip in the final status talks with the Palestinians that began in May.

The first major test of Israeli-Palestinian relations under the new government is likely to come over the question of Israeli military withdrawal from Hebron, the last Palestinian city under direct Israeli control. The Labor government had agreed to withdraw Israeli forces from most of the city, except for an area inhabited by 450 Israeli settlers, by mid-June. Netanyahu had criticized this decision during the election campaign, but stated non-committally after the election that he had requested a "study" on the issue.

While Israel's negotiations with the Palestinians are likely to proceed at a more deliberate pace than in the past, Israel's relations with Jordan, another peace partner, may actually improve. Jordan's King Hussein, who defeated Yasser Arafat's PLO in a bloody civil war in 1970, was known to be nervous about the close cooperation between Israel's Labor government and his Palestinian rival, which he feared would come at his expense. King Hussein already has publicly proclaimed support for Netanyahu and expressed confidence that the new Prime Minister will continue Israel's peace efforts.

The biggest change in Israel's foreign policy is likely to come in its strategy toward Syria. Netanyahu has ruled out a military withdrawal from the strategic Golan Heights, Israeli-occupied territory that dominates the Syrian-Israeli border area. But he has pledged to make diplomatic efforts to reach incremental agreements that could greatly improve Syrian-Israeli relations.

Adjusting U.S. Policy. Despite the Clinton Administration's open efforts to boost Peres's re-election campaign, Netanyahu assured President Clinton after the election that Israeli-American relations are "as stable as a rock." The relationship between Netanyahu's government and the Clinton Administration probably will pass through an initial honeymoon period that could last through the November U.S. elections. But friction is likely to develop on a number of fronts: the Hebron withdrawal issue, Netanyahu's plans to boost settlement activities, disagreements over security issues, and clashes over peace negotiations.

To minimize tension in bilateral relations and improve diplomatic cooperation on peace and other issues, the Clinton Administration should:

- ✓ **Sound out Netanyahu.** The Prime Minister-elect has accepted President Clinton's telephone invitation to visit Washington shortly after he forms his governing coalition. During the visit, the Administration should explore with an open mind Netanyahu's suggestions for new approaches to the peace negotiations, strategic cooperation, and other issues.
- ✓ **Rethink the Administration's approach to Arab-Israeli peace negotiations.** The May 29 elections demonstrated that Israelis increasingly are reluctant to take greater security risks in exchange for Palestinian promises that often go unfulfilled. The two-year experiment in coexistence before the commencement of final status negotiations last month was supposed to allow the two sides to build confidence in each other, which would allow both to show more flexibility in the difficult final status talks. But for Israelis the experiment in coexistence has been a nightmare. To salvage the chances for a genuine long-term settlement, the negotiating timetable for the final status agreement should be stretched out past the current 1999 deadline. This would give the Palestinian Authority more time to prove it is willing and able to stamp out terrorism. Moreover, it will take at least a generation to lay a solid foundation for a stable and lasting peace. Pressing the two sides to rush to meet the 1999 deadline, when most other deadlines set up by the September 1993 accord have been missed, is unrealistic and could undermine the chances for a genuine peace.
- ✓ **Toughen U.S. policy toward Syria.** Syrian dictator Hafez al-Assad has used his perfunctory negotiations with Israel as a diplomatic figleaf to avoid Western pressure to halt his long-standing support of terrorism. The Administration should end its coddling of Assad and lead an international campaign to impose economic and diplomatic sanctions on Damascus until it ends its support for Palestinian, Lebanese, and Turkish terrorists. As long as Syria continues to support such terrorist groups, it is unrealistic to expect it to function as an acceptable negotiating partner at the peace table.
- ✓ **Pressure Yasser Arafat to suppress terrorism.** Terrorism is the chief threat to peace. The Clinton Administration should warn Arafat that, if the Palestinian Authority is incapable of halting terrorism, the U.S. will support Israel's right to self-defense in the event that Netanyahu orders the IDF to strike at terrorists in the autonomous areas. Moreover, Washington should warn Arafat that it will halt its \$100 million per year in foreign aid if the Palestinian Authority continues to shirk its commitment to suppress terrorism.

Contrary to what passes for conventional wisdom in Washington, Prime Minister Netanyahu will be a pragmatic leader with a realistic foreign policy. Unlike the Peres and Clinton Administrations, which have made the peace process an end in itself, Netanyahu sees peace negotiations as a means to an end—building a stable and genuine peace based on hardheaded security arrangements.

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