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About as radical as the Reaganites

BYLINE: Douglas J. **Feith**

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Not since Ronald Reagan beat Jimmy Carter in 1980 has an election triggered such consternation from commentators anxious about peace. Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister-elect, is being depicted as a radical right-winger, planter of settlements and opponent of peace. In fact, his Likud party is in general about as radical as our Republican Party. Mr. Netanyahu favors diplomatic, defense and economic policies for Israel similar in principle to the kind of policies that Reaganites favored (and favor) for the United States.

Though Mr. Reagan rejected his predecessor's "arms control process," symbolized by the hug Mr. Carter gave Leonid Brezhnev when they signed SALT II, Mr. Reagan did not reject diplomacy. He approached the negotiating table, however, with a frame of mind different from that of Mr. Carter. Mr. Netanyahu, too, inevitably, will continue diplomacy, but not the particular approach to the "peace process" symbolized by Shimon Peres' embracing Yasser Arafat and declaring, as Mr. Carter did with Mr. Brezhnev, that the two men actually share a vision of peace.

Mr. Netanyahu has made clear that, like Mr. Reagan, he understands that negotiations with non-democratic adversaries require cautious realism. One cannot sensibly assume the other side's good faith. Democratic states can have peace only if they are strong and morally confident. Prudence requires anticipating treaty violations by the other side, so verifiability and compliance are of the essence (remember Mr. Reagan's "Trust - but verify"). These are still the themes of the conservative Republican mainstream. In congratulating Mr. Netanyahu on his victory, Sen. Bob Dole said, "I well understand Likud's emphasis on peace through strength." Such themes have been roundly ridiculed by journalists, but they helped the United States win the Cold War and Israelis evidently believe they can maximize Israel's chances of peace with security.

Likud's position on settlements reflects the peace-through-strength principle. The diplomacy of Israel's outgoing Labor Party government confirmed a lesson with long roots in Zionist history: Israel is unlikely over time to retain control over pieces of territory unless its people actually live there. Supporters of settlements reason: If Israelis do not settle an area in the territories, Israel will eventually be forced to relinquish it. If it relinquishes the territories generally, its security will be undermined and peace will therefore not be possible.

The Israeli left disagrees. The nature of the disagreement is similar to the main security controversy in the United States during the Cold War: Conservatives favored building up U.S. defense resources as the key to peace. Liberals argued that the build-up prevented peace by stimulating Soviet fear and hostility.

Mr. Netanyahu sounds Reaganite themes also when he talks of economics. He came to political maturity when he served in his first government post as No. 2 man in the Israeli Embassy in Washington during the early days of the

"Reagan Revolution." He became a close friend and student of leading free-market exponents, especially in the neo-conservative movement.

Past leaders of Israel's secular right, Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir, while not socialists, were not active anti-socialists. They were tough on security issues, but paid scant attention to economics and did little to dismantle the institutions of Israeli socialism. Mr. Netanyahu, in contrast, ascribes high importance to liberalizing the Israeli economy.

In this job, he will be getting powerful encouragement from his close personal friend Natan Sharansky, who will likely sit with him in the Cabinet. Mr. Sharansky, the former Soviet dissident, created a new political party, which won a large bloc of Knesset seats by arguing that only through free-market reform can Israel improve the situation of new immigrants and attract large numbers of additional immigrants.

Mr. Netanyahu's victory may actually bring about a substantial improvement in U.S.-Israeli relations. It would not be surprising if, on his first visit to Washington, he lays the groundwork for several departures that could prove popular here. He knows Israel can now begin to wean itself from U.S. economic aid, especially if it is serious about liberalizing the economy. He may propose a gradual phasing out of such aid. Also, he can announce, in contrast to his predecessors Messrs. Peres and Rabin that Israel now has no interest whatever in having U.S. troops stationed as peacekeepers on the Golan Heights and no interest in U.S. taxpayers "financing peace" with Syria's regime of Hafez Assad.

Also, Mr. Netanyahu can highlight Israel's interest in America's development of missile defenses. Mr. Peres and President Clinton gave lip service to cooperation in this field, but they focused narrowly on specific joint programs. Israel has an important stake not only in those programs, but in certain U.S. programs, like the one that would create a sea-based, wide-area defense system that would allow the United States, by stationing a single naval cruiser in the Eastern Mediterranean in a crisis, to add a valuable layer to Israel's missile defenses. Mr. Netanyahu knows that if he encourages Israel's friends in Congress to support such programs, he will create much good will with the broad-based forces in the United States, led by the top Republicans in Congress, that deem missile defense the gravest U.S. military deficiency.

The point is that there is more to the U.S.-Israeli relationship than whether Israel is going to relinquish territory to Syria or the Palestine Liberation Organization. Not every American is fixated on pressing Israel to make further withdrawals. Mr. Netanyahu may be able to alter the agenda of the relationship, giving Americans comfort that his policies are not only familiarly conservative, but more beneficial to U.S. interests than those of the Labor government.

Douglas J. Feith served in the Reagan administration as a Middle East specialist on the White House National Security Council staff and as deputy assistant secretary of defense.

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