



January 21, 2013

Missing Peace

Israelis aren't rejecting the peace process this election season. They're acknowledging that a solution is impossible without a credible Palestinian partner.

BY DOUGLAS J. FEITH

Israel votes on Jan. 22, and a remarkable feature of its election campaign has been the way politicians on the left have shunned the peace slogans they passionately promoted in the salad days of the peace process.

"Peace Now!" "Land for peace." "There's no alternative to peace." After Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization chief Yasir Arafat sealed the Oslo Accords in September 1993 with their famous handshake at President Bill Clinton's White House, these were proud exclamations of Israel's "peace camp." But for many Israelis, sad history over the last 20 years has discredited such talk.

These elections are expected to keep Benjamin Netanyahu of the conservative Likud Party as prime minister of a coalition government. Left-of-center parties have been campaigning about economic and cultural issues but avoiding talk of peace. Israel's *Haaretz* newspaper notes that the chief of the Labor Party "has decided to play down her party's position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" and that "issues of peace and the territories have been marginalized in the pre-election rhetoric."

Why has the left changed its tune? Israelis in general continue to crave peace, but the state of Palestinian politics leaves them hopeless. According to recent Dahaf Institute and Smith Consulting polls, more than two-thirds of Israelis support the

creation of a non-threatening Palestinian state alongside the Jewish state. If extra security provisions are assumed, support rises to 75 percent. But, as Dahaf reports, many Israelis do not believe "that the Palestinians will uphold the conditions of peace and especially those elements dealing with security."

There are grounds for this skepticism. In the Oslo process, Israel gave governmental power to the new Palestinian Authority (PA), including control over the territories in which virtually all the Arabs in the West Bank and Gaza live. Israeli prime ministers from parties on the left and the right then offered previously unthinkable concessions, including the sharing of Jerusalem and land swaps involving pre-1967 Israeli territory. In 2005, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Likud withdrew completely and unilaterally from Gaza, forcibly removing more than 8,000 Israeli settlers.

Terrorism against Israelis, however, intensified after the Rabin-Arafat handshake, with PA support. In 2000, Arafat, then the PA president, rejected an extraordinarily forthcoming peace offer from Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak (of the Labor Party) and launched the Second Intifada, which lasted more than four years and cost more than 1,000 Israeli lives. After Israel withdrew from Gaza, Hamas, an Islamist terrorist organization affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, won parliamentary elections there and seized executive power, forcibly expelling PA officials.

In 2006 and again in 2012, Palestinians provoked wars with Israel by firing rockets from Gaza indiscriminately against Israeli civilians. Palestinian schools, whether run by the PA or Hamas, persist in teaching hatred of Israel and Jews and exhorting children to armed resistance. Rather than move toward compromise to end the conflict with Israel, Palestinian leaders have been competing violently with each other in vowing eternal resistance and rejection. Even PA officials, relative

moderates compared with Hamas leaders, demand that Israel accept the "return" of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian "refugees," which would amount to Israel's destruction.

It is hardly surprising that Israelis no longer mass at political rallies to shout "Peace Now" and "There's no alternative to peace." Those slogans reflected the belief that the key impediment to peace was Israeli policy. Israel's Labor Party promoted that idea during Likud's ascendancy from 1977 to 1992. Labor politicians argued that the Palestinians were ready for a land-for-peace deal, but that Likud was more interested in controlling the West Bank and Gaza than in making peace. "Peace Now" was a way of saying that Israel could readily achieve lasting peace simply by electing Labor and changing its own policies. By insisting "there's no alternative to peace," Israelis weren't actually suggesting that they would die or commit suicide if the Arab side refused them peace; rather, they were assuming that peace was within Israel's control and rejecting it was inconceivable.

Those slogans helped elect Yitzhak Rabin as prime minister in 1992. He and other Labor strategists wanted to rid Israel of most of the West Bank and Gaza for Israel's own reasons -- to relinquish "the burden of the occupation" -- but they had long thought they could trade the territories for a peace agreement that would end the conflict. After a year of exasperating diplomacy, Rabin discovered that was not possible. He then decided that "divorcing" Israel from the territories was more important than peace.

Accordingly, Rabin accepted the Oslo Accords, which were dressed up as a land-for-peace agreement but really amounted to a unilateral Israeli withdrawal. Arafat understood from day one that his various peace promises were not really obligatory, and that Israeli withdrawal would proceed whether or not he complied.

By and large, he did not comply. When critics of the Oslo process complained that Arafat was cheating and remained an enemy, Israeli officials answered that one must make peace with one's enemies, not with one's friends. This question-begging reply, despite its obvious absurdity, was praised as ironic sagacity by the "peace camp."

But a nation cannot sustain a profound denial of reality forever. Peace is not a unilateral choice for Israel. The notion that Israelis can make peace with people committed to killing them is, not to put too fine a point on it, impractical. Hence the widespread despair in Israel about peace on this election day.