

Israel: Netanyahu rejects compromise with Palestinians

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Israel's premier, Benjamin Netanyahu, has made clear that his government is not interested in reaching any agreement with the Palestinians.

Netanyahu's speech was billed as his response to US President Barack Obama's call in Cairo on June 4 for the creation of a Palestinian state and the end of new settlements on the West Bank. It was delivered before an invited audience at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar Ilan University, near Tel Aviv, an academic stronghold of the religious right.

Netanyahu stated unequivocally that the establishment of a Palestinian "state" was dependent upon the Palestinians' acquiescence to a series of Israeli demands, which together strip the putative entity of any of the normal attributes of a state.

These demands were dressed up as Israeli "principles." The first principle and "fundamental condition" was that the Palestinians recognise not just the state of Israel, but its character as "the state of the Jewish people." This meant that Palestinian refugees who were either forced out of their homes in 1948, or who fled in 1967, would not be allowed to return to Israel.

While the Palestine Liberation Organisation recognised Israel in 1988, it has refused to accept the idea of Israel as a Jewish state because that would imply repudiating the Palestinian refugees' right of return.

Netanyahu declared that the resolution of the problem of the Palestinian refugees, financial restitution, homes and citizenship, was the responsibility of the international community and Israel's Arab neighbours. He left unclear the status of those Palestinian Israelis who form 20 percent of Israel's population and are currently Israeli citizens, in the context of demands from many of his cabinet colleagues that citizenship be dependent upon an oath of loyalty to Israel and service in the Israel Defence Force.

The second principle was demilitarisation, by which he meant that the Palestinians would not be allowed to have weapons or an army, sign military agreements, make

alliances with other countries or control their own airspace. They would also have to ensure that no arms were allowed to enter the country. This is in essence a demand that the Palestinian Authority led by Mahmoud Abbas and the PLO wage all-out civil war to eradicate Hamas and other militant groups.

Netanyahu called on the imperialist powers in general and the US in particular to provide international guarantees for demilitarisation.

Thirdly, Israel needed defensible borders, with "Jerusalem remaining the united capital of Israel," ruling out the use of East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state as well as international supervision of the Temple Mount or Haram al-Sharaf, which is considered holy by three major religions.

Israel has long said that "defensible borders" means positioning its troops along the western side of the Jordan River. This would mean either stationing troops within the Palestinian state, or further encroaching upon Palestinian land in the West Bank.

Netanyahu again rejected American demands for a freeze on Israeli settlements. Existing settlements would be allowed to grow, he said, although he threw out the crumb that there would be no new settlements. He defended the settlers, saying that they were not "enemies of peace." There have been several incidents since Netanyahu came to power in February in which Israeli forces have fired live ammunition on Palestinians in the West Bank protesting at settler violence and provocations, injuring dozens.

Netanyahu said nothing more about the future borders of a Palestinian state. There was no indication that Israel would withdraw from any of the settlements in the West Bank.

All that was on offer was a bifurcated entity, Gaza and West Bank, with the West Bank consisting of a series of non-contiguous enclaves more akin to a string of Bantustans, almost entirely encircled by and dependent upon Israel and with the Palestinian bourgeoisie serving as policeman of Israel's security.

If the Palestinians accepted these conditions, then talks

about a future state could go ahead immediately, Netanyahu said. But given that his preconditions rejected all prior United Nations resolutions, the 1993 Oslo Accords, and the 2002 Saudi Plan and were a regression even from George W. Bush's Road Map, he would have anticipated rejection by the PAs, enabling him to blame the Palestinians for their failure to achieve statehood.

Even Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, Washington's foremost Arab stooge, said that Netanyahu's speech "scuttles chances for peace." In a speech to the Egyptian army, Mubarak reportedly added, "You won't find anyone to answer that call in Egypt, or in any other place."

Nabil Abu Rudeinah, an aide to Abbas, rejected Netanyahu's demands. "Netanyahu's remarks have sabotaged all initiatives, paralyzed all efforts being made and challenges the Palestinian, Arab and American positions," he said.

Saeb Erekat, the Palestinians' chief negotiator, denounced the speech, saying the Netanyahu would have "to wait 1,000 years before he finds one Palestinian who will go along with him with this feeble state."

"Benjamin Netanyahu spoke about negotiations, but left us with nothing to negotiate as he systematically took nearly every permanent status issue off the table," he added.

Netanyahu had created new demands and wanted to impose unilaterally a solution rather than negotiate an agreement, he continued. "Nor did he accept a Palestinian state. Instead, he announced a series of conditions and qualifications that render a viable, independent and sovereign Palestinian state impossible."

Erekat called on Obama to intervene to force Israel to abide by previous interim agreements that include freezing settlement activity in the West Bank. The alternative, he said, was violence, acknowledging Netanyahu's speech for what it was—a premeditated provocation.

"President Obama, the ball is in your court tonight," Erekat said. "You have the choice tonight. You can treat Netanyahu as a prime minister above the law and...close off the path of peace tonight and set the whole region on the path of violence, chaos, extremism and bloodletting.

"The alternative is to make Netanyahu abide by the road map."

Obama, of course, did no such thing. Instead, he welcomed the speech as an "important step forward" towards a Palestinian state and "Prime Minister Netanyahu's endorsement of that goal."

For all Obama's talk of bringing a new attitude to bear on the Israeli Palestinian conflict, his response indicates that whatever differences exist between his administration and that of Bush are of a tactical character.

The US, like Israel, is only in favour of creating a Palestinian ghetto. The White House would find it easier to sell its policies to its Arab clients in the region if Israel's public pronouncements were more nuanced.

Obama's declaration of an "unbreakable bond between Israel and the US" means that Washington will continue to back Israel and has no intention of reining it in.

In so far as Netanyahu publicly defied Obama on the settlement issue, it is because he feels emboldened to do so by Washington's need for Israeli compliance regarding a possible rapprochement with Iran. The price for Israel's support for this shift in US policy is the continuation of the Bush administration's private consent to the expansion of existing settlements via "natural growth."

The European Union followed Obama's lead and called the speech "a step in the right direction." Czech Foreign Minister Jan Kohout, whose country holds the EU presidency, said, "the acceptance of a Palestinian state is there."

Sweden's Foreign Minister Carl Bildt also called it "a small step forward," while Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos insisted, "What the international community and the European Union should do is to support, encourage and promote this new dynamic" that Netanyahu had set in motion.

Nevertheless, the EU was not ready to give Netanyahu a blank cheque, fearing that his hard-line stance might provoke a resurgence of conflict in the region.

Bildt queried Netanyahu's definition of a Palestinian state, while Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini said it was "worrying" that he had excluded talks over Jerusalem's future status. British Foreign Secretary David Miliband said that a "complete freeze" on all Jewish settlements was an Israeli obligation. When he was asked if Netanyahu's declaration was sufficient for the EU to upgrade its ties with Israel, Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb replied simply, "No."



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