



# PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

## Too Clever By Half? The Problematics of Demilitarization and Other Shadows in Prime Minister Netanyahu's BESA Center Speech

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Netanyahu's speech was well-argued and unambiguous, but did not present a program of realistic action that he intends to implement. His real purpose seems to be procrastination and shifting the onus of progress onto the Palestinians. This strategy could backfire, as other parties fill the diplomatic vacuum with practical proposals of their own. One significant danger rests in Netanyahu's insistence on demilitarization, which opens the door to demands for *mutual* demilitarization, including the diminution of Israel's military presence along the highways of Judea and Samaria and the introduction of foreign military forces into the West Bank prior to the signing of a full Israeli-Palestinian agreement. In fact, mutual limits on military force have been the pattern of previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements brokered by the US. Far from soothing American-Israeli tensions, Netanyahu's call for demilitarization could yet prove to be a source of their exacerbation.

As an exercise in oratory, the speech delivered on Sunday night by Prime Minister Netanyahu at Bar-Ilan University's Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies was without doubt a tour de force. Clearly the product of an enormous investment of time and thought, the speech was as cleverly-crafted a statement as any Israeli politician has ever made.

The contrast with each of our previous prime ministers was unmistakable. Unlike Ben-Gurion, Netanyahu did not indulge in lengthy flights of ideological fancy; unlike Menachem Begin, neither did he take the risk of making any untexted and off-the-cuff remarks; unlike Olmert, he avoided dry legalisms; and unlike either Levi Eshkol, Golda Meir and – for that matter – Yitzchak Rabin and Ariel Sharon – Netanyahu spoke in Hebrew prose that was both precise and grammatically correct. In sum, the speech easily passed the test of good rhetoric set by Aristotle: it delivered a message that was articulate, well-argued and unambiguous.

When it comes to practicalities, however, the audit has to be very different. After all, Netanyahu did not announce anything like a program of realistic action that he intends to implement. His agreement to the eventual establishment of a Palestinian state -- although certainly a step of potentially enormous symbolic significance (how many other Likud leaders have ever enunciated the "S" word?) -- seems to be entirely devoid of any immediate policy implications as far as Israel is concerned.

In this respect, Netanyahu's speech contrasts unfavorably with other great statements of policy in recent international history, some of which have also been aired at academic venues. One prominent example is the address that US Secretary of State George Marshall delivered at Harvard in June 1947, in which he announced his country's determination to invest in European post-World War II recovery. Another is President Kennedy's declaration that "We choose to go to the moon" during the course of a lecture on the American space program at Rice University, Texas in June 1962. A third is the "Bush Doctrine", enunciated in a presidential address to the graduates of West Point in 2002. And a fourth (much closer to home) is Ariel Sharon's pronouncement on Israel's unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, delivered at the Herzliya Conference on National Security in 2004.

Each of those speeches served as preludes to action, leading to, respectively: the inauguration of the "Marshall Plan"; the investment of enormous funds in the "Space Race"; the promulgation of the "War on Terror"; and "disengagement".

By comparison, Netanyahu seems prepared to do nothing. From his point of view, the onus for action now lies with the Palestinians. It is they who have to fulfill the provisos which hedged around his promise to recognize their statehood. Specifically: They have to set their own house in order and get rid of the "Hamastan" established in Gaza; they have to publicly forego the right of return and relieve the plight of Palestinian refugees in their own region; they must accept internationally imposed restrictions on their freedom of diplomatic

and military action; above all, they must recognize Israel to be the state of the Jewish People.

The implication – all the more overt for being unspoken – is that until such time as all these conditions are met, the status quo will remain in force. Thus seen, the real purpose behind Netanyahu's speech might have been procrastination. With barely concealed self-satisfaction, some of the Prime Minister's less modest supporters and staff are already crowing that this aim has been attained. By placing the ball firmly in the Palestinian court, they claim, Netanyahu has deflected American pressure away from Israel and thus bought time. What is more, he has done so by paying with the cheapest of all commodities on the market – words.

If that was indeed the Prime Minister's intention, then there is a serious danger that the strategy might backfire. This is not simply because (as some in the American media have already warned) President Obama is not so easily fooled and may express dissatisfaction with the fact that Netanyahu's speech made no reference at all to the possible dismantlement of existing Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria -- legal or illegal, immediately or at some future date.

More to the point is that in other respects too Netanyahu's speech might have been too clever by half. By abstaining from announcing any substantive and practical Israeli initiative, he in fact invites other parties – principally, senior members of the American administration – to fill that vacuum by tabling (and then perhaps attempting to impose) programs of their own. The irony of this situation is reinforced by the fact that, unwittingly, the Prime Minister might in his speech himself have identified sensitive areas in which Israel might be most seriously pressed to make successive and material concessions.

“Demilitarization” offers an important example. In his speech, Mr. Netanyahu categorically insisted that a future Palestinian state will have to be demilitarized; “namely, without an army, without control of its airspace, and with effective security measures to prevent weapons smuggling into the territory”. The context within which that demand was presented leaves little doubt that what Mr. Netanyahu has in mind is the situation that will prevail at the conclusion of negotiations. The “demilitarization” of Palestinian-controlled territory, thus seen, is to be a unilateral undertaking on the part of the Palestinians, implementation of which is to be guaranteed by arrangements for international monitoring and enforcement.

Recent history provides very few successful precedents for that type of arrangement. Whilst several states have agreed to the demilitarization of

portions of their territory (as did Egypt with respect to the Sinai in 1979), very few have agreed to dispense altogether with armed forces.

Moreover, little can be learned from the handful of instances where that has been the case. Most are irrelevant to the Israeli-Palestinian situation. No one in their right mind could claim that Andorra, Luxembourg, Micronesia, or even Dominica, Grenada and Haiti – none of which maintain armed forces of their own – would, if they decided to re-arm, pose anything like the security threats to their immediate neighbors that the Palestinians do to Israel.

Others international examples must be considered decidedly discouraging from Israel's point of view. After all, even where successful, "demilitarization" has often been temporary (as was the case with West Germany after World War II and with East Timor after 2002). In other cases, it has been very tenuous and by no means a guarantee of good neighborly relations (as is witnessed by the tensions characteristic since February 2008 of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, which has foregone possession of an independent army and relies for its security on KFOR, a NATO-led international force).

Given that record, Mr. Netanyahu's vision of a de-militarized Palestinian state sounds like little more than a noble pipe-dream at best, and a smoke-screen at worst. Precisely for that reason, however, it may induce the Americans to press for the implementation of a form of demilitarization that is based on entirely different understandings of the concept.

Two such alternatives, both leading to entirely different scenarios from that outlined by Netanyahu, present themselves. First, that "demilitarization" be considered a process as much as an end-result, and hence a vehicle of negotiations rather than a sign of their successful conclusion, Second, and by the same token, that "demilitarization" – far from constituting a single, unilateral act affecting just one party -- be considered a series of mutual steps, taken by Israelis as well as Palestinians.

Significantly, both interpretations are implicit in all the previous agreements that, under US brokerage, Israeli governments have reached with the Palestinian Authority. Articles 10-16 of the Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip ("Oslo II") signed in September 1995 by Yitzchak Rabin and Yassir Arafat did not only specify the quantity of security forces to be maintained by the Palestinians and the character of their weapons. It also itemized the various areas ("A", "B", "C") of IDF deployment and re-deployment. So, too, did two subsequent documents, both of which were signed by Mr. Netanyahu in his first administration: the "Protocol Concerning

the Redeployment in Hebron", of January 1997, and the Wye River Memorandum of October 1998.

In each case, curbs were placed not just on the military activities permitted to Palestinians but on those that the Israelis too could pursue in designated localities. Moreover, the 1997 Hebron agreement also led to the establishment of an international "presence" in the town (designated the TIPH), although the persons involved were tasked solely with monitoring and reporting and given no constabulary or military functions.

The prominence given by Mr. Netanyahu to "demilitarization" virtually invites the Americans to press for the same pattern to be repeated in a new round of negotiations. Why, they might ask, should only the Palestinians be forbidden to fly military aircraft over their own air space? Shouldn't the same restriction apply to the Israeli Air Force? Likewise, if the Palestinians are barred from maintaining a presence of infantry forces (not to mention heavy armor) in their own state, shouldn't the IDF make a complementary move by removing the last vestiges of its military presence in Judea and Samaria, including its remaining patrols along the area's highways and its bases in the Jordan Valley? Wouldn't such moves function as "confidence building measures" – proof to the Palestinians that Israel is sincere about granting them independence and inducements for them to provide similarly concrete evidence of the sincerity of their own intentions?

If indeed forthcoming, such suggestions -- especially if they are wrapped up in barely-veiled threats that non compliance would generate considerable displeasure on the part of the US President and his immediate entourage -- could well confront Mr. Netanyahu with at least two serious dilemmas. One could derive from a fear that compliance with demands for a step-by-step process of mutual demilitarization will expose the settler population in Judea and Samaria to increased risks. The second and even more serious dilemma is the suspicion that precisely the same mechanism might bring Israeli-American relations to the brink of crisis.

The first fear – that a step-by-step process of mutual demilitarization will expose the settlers to increased risks – threatens to undermine what appears to be a central plank in Mr. Netanyahu's overall strategy. In his BESA Center speech, the Prime Minister deliberately attempted to downplay the entire settlement topic. Not even indirectly did he take issue with Mr. Obama's insistence that some settlements have to be dismantled. Neither did he indulge in the conventional Israeli mantra that settlement expansion has at least to keep pace with "natural growth."

Instead, he restricted himself to a promise that his government has “no intention of building new settlements or of expropriating [additional] land for existing settlements.”<sup>1</sup> The strategic goal was plain: focus attention on other matters and thus by-pass the single issue most likely to bring about a head-on collision with Mr. Obama.

Thanks to the emphasis that Mr. Netanyahu has placed on “demilitarization” this stratagem could well backfire. Rightly or wrongly, the settlers will argue that any diminution of Israel’s military presence along the highways of Judea and Samaria will endanger their lives and traffic. At the very least, this charge will lead to demands that the settlers be allowed to augment their own system of self-defense (itself a recipe for clashes with other armed personnel, foreign as well as Palestinian). At worst, it could incite suspicion that Mr. Netanyahu is colluding with an American plot to undermine the settlers’ confidence in the continued viability of their enterprise.

Even the soft right of the Israeli political spectrum must have cause to brood on the way in which, in his BESA Center speech, Mr. Netanyahu damned the settlers with faint praise when he pronounced them to be “not the enemies of peace”. More of the same and he could well find himself confronting just the sort of coalition crisis that in the week prior to delivering his address he took such obvious pains to avoid.

To this must be added, secondly, the likelihood that Mr. Netanyahu's insistence on Palestinian de-militarization could, unwittingly, bring about precisely the sort of clash with the Americans that he also clearly wishes to avert – and, indeed, that he has to avoid in order to ensure their cooperation with Israel over the Iranian threat.

By way of illustration, let's assume that Mr. Obama and/or his aides do indeed choose to interpret demilitarization in a way that requires Israel to take interim steps in tandem with the Palestinians, beginning with a promise to respect Palestinian air space. An Israeli response that any such move would endanger Israel's basic security is hardly likely to be considered valid. Surely, it will be argued, the IDF has at its disposal a sufficient range of supplementary surveillance devices and land-based precision-guided missiles to dispose of any

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<sup>1</sup> This is the one point in the speech that I have identified a discrepancy between the original Hebrew version (both as delivered by Mr. Netanyahu and as subsequently distributed as a text by the Prime Minister's Office) and its official English translation. Literally, what the original Hebrew in fact says is that Israel does not intend "to expropriate land for the expansion of existing settlements". Even readers not schooled in rabbinic casuistry might consider the distinction significant. The insertion of the word "additional" implies an admission that Israeli settlements have in the past indeed been constructed on lands expropriated from their rightful Palestinian owners.

suspicion that a ban on over-flights will seriously impair its ability to control whatever is happening on the ground in Palestine.

Likewise, the Israelis can hardly refuse to accept assurances that the insertion of an international force – which is a possible second step in the de-militarization process -- will monitor Palestinian compliance with agreed limitations on the size and character of their gendarmerie. After all, Mr. Netanyahu himself made "international assurances" concerning Palestinian de-militarization one of his conditions for Palestinian statehood. All that the Americans would demand is that he brings forward that plank in his platform to an earlier date than he presently envisages. Would any Israeli government dare to squabble with the United States over what could be made to appear little more than a matter of timing, and in so doing sour a relationship that is vital to the preservation of Israel's long-term security?

Here, too, Mr. Netanyahu might find that he will have to pay the price of his own rhetoric. Far from soothing American-Israeli tensions, his call for "demilitarization" could in retrospect well prove to have been a source of their exacerbation, compelling him to take the sort of steps that his BESA Center speech was supposed to make unnecessary.

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Winston Churchill, who certainly knew a thing or two about the impact of great speeches, never tired of pointing out their limitations. Subsequent to the British withdrawal from Dunkirk in 1940, for instance, he admitted that not even his own stirring rhetoric ("We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender") could assure victory. In the last analysis, words are only effective when they motivate action.

One can only hope that Mr. Netanyahu bears that message in mind. For the moment, his BESA Center speech has certainly served its purpose, enabling Israel to scramble to the top of the diplomatic pile. In order to stay there, the government now needs to formulate a program of practical steps that will encourage the Palestinians as well as the Americans to believe that concrete progress towards the two-state solution can be made. This also requires deep thinking and consultation with Washington on what demilitarization might mean. Failure to take such measures will simply allow others to grasp the initiative, possibly by finding in Mr. Netanyahu's own words meanings that he certainly never intended, and of which he may have been unaware.

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