

Two States: In Principle? Yes. Now? No.

Jonathan S. Tobin 2015-03-19

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Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's statement today claiming that he still favors a two-state solution to the conflict with the Palestinians isn't likely to persuade his detractors that he wants peace. The day before his decisive victory in Tuesday's election, he vowed that there would be no Palestinian state established on his watch. This provoked a torrent of international criticism and served as justification for Obama administration threats to abandon Israel at the United Nations. But while Netanyahu can certainly be accused with some justice of being a cynical flip-flopper, this episode doesn't justify the claims that Israel wasn't negotiating in good faith with the Palestinians during the past few years. Nor is it entirely illogical. In fact, the two statements show that Netanyahu is very much in tune with the views of most Israelis. They support a two-state solution with the Palestinians in principle. But they also know that isn't a realistic option under the current circumstances.

Let's concede that Netanyahu's comments about not allowing the creation of a Palestinian state while he was prime minister was a brazen attempt to lure voters away from right-wing allies in order to boost his Likud Party totals. But whether this was necessary or not, it must be accepted that it helped him and that it was not unfair of critics to conclude that he was retracting his 2009 Bar-Ilan University speech in which he accepted a two-states as the basis for peace. But his subsequent effort in an interview with NBC's Andrew Mitchell to claim that he still favors such a solution is, while seemingly inconsistent, actually correct.

Whatever he may have said on Monday, the left's talking point about the campaign proving that Netanyahu had been lying for six years doesn't hold water. Whether you like the prime minister or loathe him, the fact remains that Netanyahu did freeze settlement building at President Obama's behest. He also sent his recent electoral opponent Tzipi Livni to negotiate peace with Secretary of State John Kerry and Palestinian Authority head Mahmoud Abbas. As we now know, documents have revealed that he went a long way toward accommodating Kerry's ideas for a framework during those talks and even Livni concedes that it was Abbas who torpedoed them by never negotiating in good faith. Had Abbas been serious about a two state solution at any point during the last six years he could have said he was willing to recognize Israel as a Jewish state but he refused to do so no matter where its borders might be drawn. He also continued to assert that he could never give up the right of return for the descendants of the 1948 refugees. Both stands are reflective of the fact that Palestinian nationalism has always been inextricably tied to the war on Zionism. Assuming he wanted to, Abbas is incapable of abandoning these stands and surviving. Hamas has no interest in such a scenario.

Moreover, Palestinian actions during the last 20 years of peace processing have convinced the overwhelming majority of Israeli voters, including many who voted for Netanyahu's opponents, that neither Abbas nor his Hamas rivals ruling in Gaza have any interest in

signing a peace agreement that will end the conflict for all time. Even if you want to ignore what happened in the 1990s when Yasir Arafat was running the Palestinian Authority and it set out on a course of fomenting hatred and subsidizing terrorism, Abbas's record is not better. In 2008, he rejected Ehud Olmert's offer of independence and a state in almost all of the West Bank, Gaza and a share of Jerusalem just as Arafat had done in 2000 and 2001. Even worse, after Israel's 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, the strip has become an independent Palestinian state in all but name and transformed into a base for terrorism by its Hamas rulers.

Under those circumstances and with the PA refusing to hold elections about of fear that the corrupt kleptocracy that runs the West Bank might be replaced by their Islamist rivals, it's little wonder most Israeli voters think Netanyahu was right when he warned that two states now meant another Hamasistan next to the Jewish state's population centers.

A two state solution in which a demilitarized Palestinian state lives peacefully next to Israel with both Jews and Arabs free to live unmolested on either side of the border is the ideal solution to the conflict. But until a sea change in the Palestinian political culture happens to make that an actual possibility rather than merely a fantasy, no rational Israeli government would consent to a complete withdrawal from the territory.

Is it possible to oppose a two-state solution under the current circumstances but to be for it in principle? Netanyahu's detractors would argue that it isn't. What's more they claim that his vow and his "Hamasistan" comments show that he merely wants to preserve the status quo.

But this reflects the basic myth that has been the foundation of the mistaken policies pursued by the Obama administration. Like some on the Jewish left, they've wrongly assumed that the only thing that is missing for peace to become a reality is a willingness on Israel's part to take risks to achieve it. But Israel has been taking such risks for 20 years and has discovered that it traded land for terror, not peace. That realization has rendered the Israeli left unelectable and given Netanyahu a fourth term in office. Even if Isaac Herzog's Zionist Union had beaten the Likud on Tuesday, he was no more likely to create a Palestinian state than Netanyahu.

It's long past time for the United States to stop pretending that Palestinian intransigence and terror are the real obstacles to peace. Peace will happen when the Palestinians decide they are ready for a two state solution that has always been favored more by Israelis than Arabs. Until that happens, it can remain a theoretical goal but one that, like Netanyahu, sensible Israelis will not choose to pursue under the present circumstances.