



WIDENING GAP IMPEDES PEACE PROCESS

INTERVIEW WITH COL. (RES.) MIRI EISIN, FORMER SPOKESPERSON OF THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT

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Israeli politics have in recent months been unusually eventful. In addition to a looming Iranian nuclear threat, a raging civil war in Syria and presidential elections in Egypt, the Israeli public has witnessed significant shifts on the domestic arena. ISDP has met with Col. (res.) Miri Eisin, a former spokesperson of the Israeli government and media advisor to the Prime Minister's office, to discuss current developments and future prospects.

Just over a month ago it seemed clear that early elections to the Knesset would be held before the end of the year. Instead, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took his constituents by surprise and announced his new political partnership with the leader of the Kadima party, Shaul Mofaz. Mofaz has not only called Netanyahu a liar on repeated occasions, but also declared that he would under no circumstances join the current government. On March 3, visitors to his Facebook page could read that he would “not enter Bibi’s [Netanyahu’s] government. Not today. Not tomorrow ... This is a bad and failed government that doesn’t listen to the people, and Kadima under my leadership will replace it in the next elections.” Nevertheless, on May 8 Mofaz accepted the Prime Minister’s invitation to form a unity government made up of an astonishing 94 out of 120 seats. As part of the deal he was appointed Deputy Prime Minister and Minister without Portfolio, as well as included in the inner security cabinet. Miri Eisin points to the pragmatic aspect of Mofaz’ decision to join the government:

– Mofaz is going to disappear in the next elections. He did it because he knew that he would disappear, and this way he gets to be a minister until the next elections, and I think that on the political level he wants to be part of whatever historical event is going to happen now.

The historical event referred to by Eisin is spelled Iran and fears have recently been pumped up by Netanyahu

in a series of public statements. Perhaps most notably, in a speech on Holocaust Memorial Day in Jerusalem, the Prime Minister directly compared the Iranian threat to the Holocaust. In another speech in Washington D.C. on March 5, he said that “none of us can afford to wait much longer” for diplomacy or sanctions to work. Netanyahu has been criticized for exaggerating the threat in order to consolidate support for his government. Miri Eisin:

– I actually don’t think it is done to gain support. I think that this is very deep-down, a psychological aspect of Israel; the idea that the war has not ended. I myself don’t always know how to explain this, it is not rational. My husband calls it the Israeli-Jewish post-trauma of the Holocaust. Seventy years after it happened we still see our need for security as something which needs to be noticed and approached.

For Miri Eisin, using the Holocaust as an illustration for the threat posed by Iran to the Jewish state is in no way exaggerating. She also believes that it represents the sentiments of the Israeli public, where the issue is becoming more salient. At the same time, she acknowledges that Netanyahu has put himself in a difficult situation:

– Right now he has taken a stand, that it is as bad as the Holocaust, and that we can’t let this happen. He has put himself in a position, where policy-wise, if he doesn’t do anything, and it happens – what could



be a bigger failure? Does that mean that the government has to act, even if it is with horrific results? Of course this is a dilemma. He has put himself in a very black-and-white position which means that either he needs to take action immediately, or he has to explain very clearly why he is not taking action.

In relation to the perception in the West of a broadening Israeli government, Eisin brings up the central theme in her argument; that there is a widening gap between Israeli and Western narratives. While in Western media, Netanyahu's decision to invite Kadima into his coalition has been interpreted as paving the way for a military attack against Iran, Miri Eisin offers a different outlook on the issue:

– This is exactly that outer perception which sees Netanyahu with all the negative qualities with which Israelis are seen. There is a focus on Netanyahu as “the bad guy” and that by broadening his government he is broadening these bad qualities. But for Israelis, the broadening of the government means that all sides of the Israeli public are being represented.

At the same time, public reactions to the unity government were far from positive. Many Israelis showed disillusionment with the political system and several protests were held around the country, mainly directing anger at Mofaz. Former Kadima chair Tzipi Livni also criticized the move saying that the Israeli people “deserve politics of principles and not of seats, of values and not of survival”. Miri Eisin points to the fact that Israeli society is a “very cynical and critical society” and that these kinds of government reshuffles are in no way a new phenomenon.

The unity deal also prompted speculations regarding its significance in relation to Israeli-Palestinian relations. The seemingly unending issue of the failed peace process is constantly present in the consciousness of all Israelis and that of most of the world, and whatever changes take place usually spark a debate over how the peace process will be affected. Miri Eisin expresses a cautious optimism:

– When you have 94 out of 120 Knesset members, you can do *anything*. I am now waiting to see what will be – they can pass legislation, they have the backing of the government. What kind of opposition is an

opposition of 26 out of 120? So now I have enormous expectations, I don't want to be disappointed. But I haven't yet heard what this broad government is going to do, except that it is making very strong statements about the Iranian issue, but not on anything else.

Here, again, the gap in perceptions becomes apparent, but this time between the Israeli and the Palestinian narratives. While Eisin and other Israeli officials would like to interpret the unity government as something with potentially positive implications for the peace process, Palestinian Foreign Minister Riad Malki has said that the new coalition would only serve to further the interests of its leading partners and that he saw little prospect of a softening in Israel's stance. According to Miri Eisin, the Palestinians have, from their perspective, good reason to be pessimistic about the peace process at this point:

– They know that if they sit down at the table now, they are going to get less than what [former Prime Minister Ehud] Olmert offered them. We all know that Netanyahu will offer less, and obviously the Palestinians understand that too, so why would they go back to the table?

Consequently the Palestinians are, according to Eisin, deliberately delaying the peace process. Another aspect is that “the world sides with the Palestinians”. While world leaders may be aware that the Palestinians are using delay tactics, the world opinion on Netanyahu is extremely negative and as such the Palestinians are given the benefit of the doubt and can avoid taking steps to further the peace process. However, while the role of international actors in promoting negotiations is crucial, there is one component which cannot be fabricated:

– The ingredient that is missing is trust on both sides and I don't think that you can invent trust. So each side needs to take a leap of faith. Israelis feel like they have done that and not gotten anywhere. Palestinians do not want to do that with Netanyahu, they feel that they know him and they know what is going to happen. Therefore they feel like they don't need to make any gestures.



Furthermore, recent changes and the instability in the Arab world have led Israeli leaders to put the peace process on the back burner.

– A large part of the reason that it is so difficult right now is the instability; you do not want to step right out into that unstable world. But I think that the regional changes, once they stabilize, could be of importance.

The future nature of Israeli-Palestinian relations is to a great extent dependent on leadership, and what will be after President Mahmoud Abbas. Abbas' presidential term expired in 2009, and the lack of support for the President both within his own party and in Palestinian society leads many to conclude that he does not have the mandate to negotiate with Israel. Miri Eisin speaks about the significance of the choice Palestinian society will face once presidential elections come around:

– I assume Abbas will not run for president again, whenever there will be Palestinian elections; they are endlessly rescheduled. Leadership is enormously important and I don't expect the Palestinians to vote for a Zionist candidate. I expect them to vote for whoever they think is best. Actually their elections are very democratic, as opposed to their legislature or their judicial system – their elections are free. They can vote for whoever they want and they can have lots of different candidates. I will be very interested to see what issues are important to them when they vote for their next president.

In the meantime, Miri Eisin is concerned about the gap between the Israeli and Palestinian narratives, and the difficulties for Israeli leadership in communicating to the West what issues should be prioritized. For instance, Eisin emphasizes a lack of understanding and respect in the West for the Israeli democratic process. One example is the issue of the Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Western media and policy-makers constantly mention the settlements as one of the main obstacles to peace. For Israelis, Eisin explains, singling out settlements as the key to solving the conflict is very challenging and does not aid in furthering the peace process. She also argues that Abbas' approach toward Israel and toward resuming negotiations contributes to furthering the gap.

– I think that as long as Abbas is in power, he will avoid [negotiations] in every way possible and make sure that the blame is on Israel, because it is all about settlements and occupation. The governments of Europe may know that it is not so, so that they will not sanction Israel. But the public opinion will absolutely take it as such because [the Palestinians] are the oppressed and they are the victims and they are the ones that do not have a state. So we are going to have a widening gap, even more than there is today. This gap is going to be a challenge.

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