

Netanyahu's Victory and Obama's Response

A saying attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt is that small minds discuss people, average minds discuss events, and great minds discuss ideas. This is not applicable to all commentators on public affairs but sadly rather true about the remarks made by the White House after the victory of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the parliamentary election in Israel on March 17, 2015, as well as declarations during the controversy over the speech Netanyahu delivered to a joint session of Congress on March 3, 2015.

Some of the remarks about the person of Netanyahu are hyperbolic, disrespectful, and quite inexplicable. National Security Advisor Susan Rice, before the election, declared that Netanyahu's speech would be "destructive of the fabric of the relationship" between the United States and Israel. After the Israeli election, White House spokesman, Josh Earnest, spoke of the "divisive rhetoric that seeks to marginalize Arab Israeli citizens, and undermines the values and democratic ideals that have been important to our democracy and an important part of what binds the US and Israel together."

It must come as a shock to the *New York Times* and the rest of the mainstream media to learn that "divisive rhetoric," if not playing the race card as in U.S. elections, is used in hard fought national political campaigns in other democratic countries. The media must also be bewildered that "values and democratic ideals" have been perverted by an Israeli election in which 25 political parties participated, and in which ten parties got seats. In the high poll, 71.8% of the electorate voted, 17% higher than those voting in the 2012 U.S. presidential election and 35% higher than in the U.S. Congressional election in 2014. On that basis which country

better fulfills democratic values than Israel?

Most important in the commentary is the absence of attention by the White House to the participation and relative success of Israel Arabs in a free and fair election. The threshold to gain seats in Israel's proportional representation electoral system was raised from 2% to 3.25%. Far from being "marginalized" the Arabs thus formed a united party, the Joint List, composed out of four previous Arab parties, that got 11% of the poll and 13 seats in the 120 member Knesset. This success makes the Joint List the third largest party in the Knesset. Since 4 other Arabs were elected from other parties there are now 17 Arabs in the parliament, almost the proportion of Arabs living in the State of Israel.

Estimates show that about 65% of the Arab population of Israel voted. In contrast, the estimated vote of African-Americans in the U.S. 2014 Presidential election was less than 25%. It is also worth noting in the "marginalization" that the chairman of the Israeli Central Elections Committee, that oversees the election formalities, is an Arab judge.

Two factors are particularly interesting. One is related to the surveys taken of the expressed concerns of Israeli Arab voters. These show that Arab voters are concerned with socio-economic conditions and their civil status, not with the issue that concerns the White House, the need for a Palestinian state. Those concerns and priorities are about employment, education, healthcare, and neighborhood crime, rather than statehood issues. There appears to be a significant ideological gulf between Israeli Arabs, living in a country with civil liberties and being part of a democratic system, and Arabs living in the West Bank and in Gaza.

The other factor is that Israeli Arabs, more represented and more confident, can be expected to play a more considerable role and have more clout in the politics of Israel. What

impact that will have on the security concerns of Israel and the possibility of a Palestinian state remains to be seen.

The main issue with which the U.S. administration is concerned is that of a Palestinian state. President Barack Obama appears to be more concerned with maintaining this stance than in offering congratulations to Prime Minister Netanyahu. Other political leaders, British Minister David Cameron, Chancellor Angela Merkel, President Francois Hollande, the prime ministers of Australia, Netherlands, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and India, and the foreign affairs head of the European Union, quickly made the customary polite remarks to the Israeli leader. Prime Minister Cameron had twittered that he looked forward to working with the government of Israel, one of Britain's closest friends.

The White House appeared less enthusiastic and certainly less personally cordial. The formal cold statement issued after the belated phone conversation between the U.S. and Israeli leaders stated they agreed "to continue consultations on a range of regional issues, including the difficult path forward to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

However, much more pointed were the remarks of Obama and his spokespeople that the U.S. was reassessing its approach to Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts. One can imagine that reassessment will entail a number of factors, including UN resolutions on a Palestinian state, and the attempt of the Palestinian Authority to bring charges of war crimes against Israel to the International Criminal Court. One issue will certainly be that of the Israeli settlements, that, in the words of the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in spring 2010, were a "deeply moving signal" that harmed the bilateral relationship, and that Obama considers illegal.

The lack of warmth of the U.S. leader to his Israeli counterpart has long been evident, but it must be disregarded

in the effort to achieve a lasting peace. Differences inevitably arise between allied nations, and the current issue of a nuclear Iran is a pressing and controversial one on which Obama and Netanyahu differ. But for 40 years, U.S. policy in the Middle East has been based on shaping an Israel-Arab peace agreement resulting from a process of negotiations between the two parties, not from unilateral actions. For Obama to support a UN Resolution calling for a Palestinian state would be to transform what has been a bipartisan U.S. policy into a one party point of view.

In the interests of peace as well as harmonious US-Israeli relations it is essential that Obama rethink his immediate response to Netanyahu's victory. Obama had already injected himself into the Israeli electoral campaign if only indirectly as a result of the work of Democratic Party operatives. Netanyahu was perhaps excessive in his rhetoric that complained of the foreign-funded effort to topple his party. Yet he was correct that a group, led by a former national organizer for Obama, had set up the electoral V15 organization and boasted they were doing a job of getting out the anti-Netanyahu vote with over 15,000 volunteers throughout Israel.

In this connection it is not encouraging that Robert Malley, whom Susan Rice called one of "my most trusted advisors", was appointed on March 6, 2015 as White House Coordinator for the Middle East. He is known both for having blamed Israel for the failure of peace talks, and for his friendly contacts with Hamas.

Obama expressed displeasure at Netanyahu's pre-election comment that he did not approve a Palestinian state while there was chaos in the Middle East, a qualification that was not understood or ignored by many commentators. It would be wise to accept the Netanyahu's statement that he remains committed to a demilitarized state of Palestine if conditions are satisfactory, and if PA President Abbas recognizes Israel

as a Jewish state. This means a sustainable, two-state solution if conditions in the region change. One of these conditions is for Abbas to end his shaky pact with the terrorist Hamas entity in Gaza.

Netanyahu explained his position by arguing that Islamist forces have absorbed every territory that has been vacated in the Middle East. Now that's an issue for discussion by great minds.

First published in the